

THE GIRL WHO HAD NOTHING

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THE GIRL WHO HAD NOTHING

By

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CHAPTER I--The Old Lady in the Victoria

Joan Carthew had reason to believe that it was her birthday, and she had signalled the occasion by running away from home. But her birthday, and her home, and her running away, were all so different from things with the same name in the lives of other children, that the celebration was not in reality as festive as it might seem if put into print.

In the first place, she based her theory as to the date solely upon a dim recollection that once, eons of years ago, when she had been a petted little creature with belongings of her own (she was now twelve), there had been presents and sweets on the 13th of May. She thought she could recall looking eagerly forward to that anniversary; and she argued shrewdly that, as her assortment of agreeable memories was small, in all likelihood she had not made a mistake.

In the second place, Joan's home was a Brighton lodging-house, where she was a guest of the landlady, and not a "paying" guest, as she was frequently reminded. In that vague time, eons ago, she had been left at the house by her mother (who was, it seemed, an actress), with a sum of money large enough to pay for her keep until that lady's return from touring, at the end of the theatrical season. The end of the season and the end of the money had come about the same time, but not the expected mother. The beautiful Mrs. Carthew, whose professional name was Marie Lanchester, had never reappeared, never written. Mrs. Boyle had made inquiries, advertised, and spent many shillings on theatrical papers, but had been able to learn nothing. Mr. Carthew was a vague shadow in a mysterious background, less substantial even than a "walking gentleman," and Mrs. Boyle, feeling herself a much injured woman, had in her first passion of resentment boxed Joan's ears and threatened to send the "brat" to the poorhouse. But the child was in her seventh year and beginning to be useful. She liked running up and downstairs to answer the lodgers' bells, which saved steps for the two overworked servants; and, of course, when she became a financial burden instead of the means of lightening burdens, it was discovered that she could do many other things with equal ease and propriety. She could clean boots and knives, wash dishes, help make beds, and carry trays; she could also be slapped for misdeeds of her own and those of others, an act which afforded invariable relief to the landlady's feelings. As years went on, further spheres of usefulness opened, especially after the Boyle baby came; one servant could be kept instead of two; and taking everything into consideration, Joan's hostess decided to continue her charity. Therefore, the child could have answered the conundrum, "When is a home not a home?" out of the stores of her intimate experience.

In the third place, she had only run away as far as one of the shelters on the Marine Parade; she had brought the landlady's baby with her, and, lurking grimly in the recesses of her mind, she had the virtuous intention of going home again when Minnie should be hungry enough to cry, at tea-time.

Joan was telling the two-year-old Minnie a fairy story, made up out of her own head, all about a gorgeous princess, and founded on the adventures she herself would best like to have, when, just as the narrative was working towards an exciting climax, a girl of Joan's own age came in sight, walking with her governess.

The story broke off short between Joan's little white teeth, which suddenly shut together with a click. This did not signify much, as far as the Boyle baby was concerned, for Joan unconsciously wove fairy tales more for her own pleasure than that of her companion, and as a matter of fact the warmth of the afternoon sunshine had acted as "juice of poppy and mandragora" upon Minnie's brain. Her small, primrose-yellow head was nodding, and she was unaware that the story had ended abruptly just as the princess was beguiling the dragon, and that a girl

almost as fine as the princess herself was approaching.

The new-comer was about twelve or thirteen, and she was more exquisitely dressed than any child Joan remembered to have met. Perhaps, if the apparition had been a good deal younger or older, the lodging-house drudge would not have observed so keenly, or realised with a quick stab of passionate pain the illimitable gulf dividing lives. But here was a girl of her own age, her own height, her own needs and capacities, and yet—the difference!

It struck her like a thrust of some thin, delicate surgical instrument which could inflict anguish, yet leave no trace. Joan's whole life was spent in dreaming; without the dreams, existence at 12, Seafoam Terrace would not have been tolerable to a young creature with the nerves of a racehorse and the imagination of a Scheherazade. She lived practically a double life within herself, but never until this moment had she been consciously jealous of the happier fate of a fellow-creature.

In looking from the shelter where she sat in shadow, at the other girl who walked in sunshine, she knew the crunching pain of the monster's fangs.

The other girl had long, fair hair; she wore white muslin, foaming with lace frills, white silk stockings, and shoes of white suede. Her face was shaded by a great, rose-crowned, leghorn hat, which flopped into soft curves and made a picture of small features which without it might have seemed insignificant. The magnetism that was in Joan Carthew's eyes forced the girl to turn and throw a glance as she passed at the shabby child in faded brown serge (a frock altered from a discarded one of Mrs. Boyle's) who sat huddled in the shelter, with a tawdrily dressed baby asleep by her side. The glance had all the primitive, merciless disdain of a sleek, fortunate young animal for a miserable, hunted one, and Joan felt the meaning of it in her soul.

"Why should she have everything and I nothing?" was the old-new question which shaped itself wordlessly in the child's brain. "She looks at me as if I were a rat. I'm not a rat! I'm as good as she is, if I had her clothes. I'm cleverer, and prettier, too, I know I am--heaps and heaps. Oh! I want to be like her, only better—I must be--I shall!"

She quivered with the fierceness of her revolt against fate, yet in it was no vulgar jealousy. The other girl's pale blue eyes, in one contemptuous glance, had found every patch on her frock and shoes, had criticised her old hat, and sneered at her little, rough, work-worn hands, scorning her for them as if she were a creature of an inferior race; but Joan had no personal hatred for the happier child, no wish for revenge, no desire to take from the other what she had. The feeling which shook her with sudden, stormy passion was merely the sharp realisation of injustice, the conviction that by nature she herself was worthy of the good things she had missed, the savage resolve to have what she ought to have, at any cost.

It was not tea-time yet, and Minnie was happily asleep; Joan was certain to be scolded just as sharply on her return as if she had stopped away for hours longer, therefore she might as well have drained her birthday cup of stolen pleasure to the dregs; but the good taste of the draught was gone. She yearned only to go home, to get the scolding over, and to have a few minutes to herself in the tiny back room which she shared with the baby. There seemed to be much to think of, much to decide.

The child waked Minnie, who was cross at being roused, and refused to walk. The quickest way of triumphing over the difficulty was to carry her, and this method Joan promptly adopted. But the baby was heavy and fractious. She wriggled in her young nurse's grasp, and just as Joan had staggered round the corner of Seafoam Terrace, with her disproportionate burden, she tripped and fell, under the windows of No. 12.

Minnie roared, and there was an echoing shriek from the house. Mrs. Boyle, who had been looking up and down the street in angry quest of her missing drudge, saw the catastrophe and rushed to the rescue of her offspring. She snatched the baby, who was more frightened than hurt, and holding her by one arm, proceeded to administer chastisement to Joan.

Instinctively she knew that the girl was sensitive and proud, though she had no kindred feelings in her own soul, and she delighted in humiliating her drudge before the whole street. As she screamed reproaches and harsh names, raining a shower of blows on Joan's ears and head and burning cheeks, a face appeared in at least one window of each house along the Terrace. Though a cataract of sparks cascaded before the child's eyes, somehow she saw the faces and imagined a dozen for every one.

The shame seemed to her beyond bearing. She forgot even her love for the baby, which (with the dreams) was the bright thread in the dull fabric of her existence. After this martyrdom, she neither could nor would live on in Seafoam Terrace, which with all its eyes had seen her beaten like a dog.

"Into the house with you, you lazy, good-for-nothing brat!" panted Mrs. Boyle, when her hand was tired of smiting; and with a push, she would have urged the girl towards the open front door, but Joan turned suddenly and faced her.

"No!" she cried, "I won't be your servant any more! I've done with you. I will never go into your hateful house again, until I come back as a grand lady you will have to bow down to and worship."

These were grandiloquent words, and Mrs. Boyle would either have laughed with a coarse sneer, or struck Joan again for her impudence, had not the look in the child's great eyes actually cowed her for the moment. In that moment the thin girl of twelve, whom she had beaten, seemed to grow very tall and wonderfully

beautiful; and in the next, she had gone like a whirlwind which comes and passes before it has been realised.

Joan was desperate. Her newly formed ambition and her stinging shame mounted like frothing wine to her hot brain. She was in a mood to kill herself--or make her fortune.

For a time she flew on blindly, neither knowing nor caring which way she went. By and by, as breath and strength failed, she ran more slowly, then settled into a quick, unsteady walk. She was on the front, running in the direction of Hove, and in the distance a handsome victoria with two horses was coming. The sun shone on the silver harness and the horses' satin backs. There was a coachman and a groom in livery, and in the carriage sat an old lady dressed in grey silk, of the same soft tint as her hair.

Joan had seen this old lady in her victoria several times before, and had pretended to herself, in one of her glittering dreams, that the lady took a fancy to her and proposed adoption.

Now, in a flash of thought, which came quick as the glint of light on a bird's wing, the child told herself that this thing must happen. She had no home, no people, nothing; she would stake her life on the one throw which might win all or lose all.

Without stopping to be afraid, or to argue whether she were brave or foolhardy, she ran forward and threw herself in front of the horses. The coachman pulled them up so sharply that the splendid pair plunged, almost falling back on to the victoria, but he was not quick enough to save the child one blow on the shoulder from an iron-shod hoof.

In an instant the groom was in the road and had snatched her up, with a few gruff words which Joan dimly heard and understood, although she had just enough consciousness left to feign unconsciousness.

"How dreadful! how dreadful!" the old lady was exclaiming. "You must put the poor little thing in the carriage, and I'll drive to the nearest doctor's."

"Better let me take her in a cab to a hospital, my lady," advised the groom. "It wasn't our fault. She ran under the horses' feet. Tomkins and me can both swear to that."

The arbitress of Joan's fate appeared to hesitate, and the child thought best to revive enough to open her eyes (which she knew to be large and soft as a fawn's) for one imploring glance. In the fall which had caused her to drop the Boyle baby, she had grazed her forehead against a lamp-post, and on the small, white face there remained a stain of blood which was effective at this juncture. She started, put out her hand, and groped for the old lady's dress, at which she caught as a drowning man is said to catch at a straw.

"On second thoughts, I will take her home, if she can tell me where she lives.

She seems to be reviving," said the lady. "Where do you live, my poor little girl?"

"I--don't live anywhere," gasped Joan, white-lipped. "I haven't any mother or any home, or anything. I wanted to die."

"Oh, you poor little pitiful thing! What a sad story!" crooned the old lady. "You shall go to *my* home, and stop till you get well, and I will buy you a doll and lots of nice toys."

The rapidly recovering Joan determined that, once in the old lady's house, she would stop long after she had got well, and that she would, sooner or later, have many things better than toys. But she smiled gratefully, faintly, looking like a broken flower. The groom was directed to place her on the seat, in a reclining posture, and she was given the old lady's silk-covered air-cushion to rest her head upon. She really ached in every bone, but she was exaggerating her sufferings, saying to herself: "It's come! I've walked right into the fairy story, and nothing shall make me walk out again. I've got nobody to look after me, so I'll have to look after myself and be my own mamma. I can't help it, whether it's right or wrong. I don't know much about right and wrong, anyhow, so I shan't bother. I've got to grow up a grand, rich lady; my chance has come, and I'd be silly not to take it."

Having thus disposed of her conscience--such as her wretched life had made it--Joan proceeded to faint again, as picturesquely as possible. Her pretty little head, rippling over with thick, gold-brown hair, fell on the grey silk shoulder and gave the kindly, rather foolish old heart underneath a warm, protecting thrill. The child's features were lovely, and her lashes very long and dark. If she had been ugly, or even plain, in spite of her appealing ways, Lady Thorndyke (the widow of a rich City knight) would probably have agreed to the groom's suggestion; but Joan did not overestimate her own charms and their power. A quarter of a century ago Lady Thorndyke had lost a little girl about the age of this pathetic waif, and she had had no other child. There was a nephew on the Stock Exchange, but Lady Thorndyke was interested in him merely because she thought it her duty, though he had been brought up to take it for granted that he would be her heir. In truth, the lonely woman had half unconsciously sighed all her life for romance and for love. She had never had much of either, and now, in this tragic child who clung to her and would not be denied, there was promise of both.

So Joan was borne in supreme spiritual triumph and slight bodily pain to the big, old-fashioned Brighton house where her new protectress spent the greater part of the year. She was put into a bed which smelled of lavender and felt like a soft, warm cloud; she went through the ordeal of being examined by a doctor, knowing that her whole future might depend upon his verdict. She lay sick and quivering with a thumping heart, lest he should say: "This child is perfectly well, except for a bruise and a scratch or two. There is nothing to prevent her being sent home." But in her anxiety Joan had worked herself into a fever. The doctor was

a fat, comfortable man, with children of his own, and the escaped drudge could have worshipped him when he announced that she was in a highly nervous state, and would be better for a few days' rest, good nursing, and nourishing food.

She had arnica and plasters externally, and internally beef-tea. Then she told her story. Had it been necessary, Joan would have plunged into a sea of fiction, but she had enough dramatic sense to perceive that nothing could be more effective than the truth, dashed in with plenty of colour.

Joan's memory was as vivid as her imagination. She was fired to eloquence by her own wrongs; and her word-sketch of the poor baby deserted by a beautiful, mysterious actress, her picturesque conjectures as to that actress's noble husband, the harrowing portrait of her angelic young self as a lodging-house drudge, the final climax, painting the savage punishment in the street, and her resolve to seek refuge in death (the one fabrication in the tale), affected the secretly sentimental heart of the City knight's widow like music.

"I would rather have been trampled to death under your horses' feet than go back!" sobbed the child.

"Don't be frightened and excite yourself, my poor, pretty little dear," Lady Thorndyke soothed her. "No harm shall come to you, I promise that."

Joan's instinctive tact had been sharpened to diplomacy by the constant need of self-defence. She said no more; she only looked; and her eyes were like those of a wounded deer which begs its life of the hunter.

Lady Thorndyke began to turn over various schemes for Joan's advantage; but that same evening, which was Saturday, her nephew, George Gallon, arrived from town to spend Sunday with his aunt. She told him somewhat timidly about the lovely child she was sheltering, and the hard-mouthed, square-chinned young man threw cold water on her projects. He said that the girl was no doubt a designing little minx, who richly deserved what she had got from the charitable if quick-tempered woman who gave her a home. He advised his aunt to be rid of the young viper as soon as possible, and meanwhile to leave the care of her entirely to servants.

His strong nature impressed itself upon Lady Thorndyke's weak one, as red-hot iron cauterises tender flesh. She believed all he said while he was with her, and conceived a distrust of Joan; but Gallon had an important deal on in the City for Monday, and was obliged to leave early, having extracted a half-promise from his aunt that the intruder should go forth that day, or at latest the next.

He had not seen Joan Carthew, and therefore had not reckoned on her strength and fascination as forces powerful enough to fence with his influence.

Joan felt the difference in her patroness's manner, as a swallow feels the coming of a storm. She knew that there had been a visitor, and she guessed what had happened. She grew cold with the chill of presentiment, but gathered herself

together for a fight to the death.

"You look much better this morning, my dear," began Lady Thorndyke nervously. "You will perhaps be well enough to get up and be dressed by and by, to drive out with me, and choose yourself a doll, or anything you would like. You will be glad to hear that--that my nephew and I called on Mrs. Boyle yesterday, and--she is sorry if she was harsh. In future, you will not be living on her charity. I shall give her a small yearly sum for your board and clothing. You will be sent to school, as you ought to have been long ago, and really I don't see how she managed to avoid this duty. But in any case you will be happy."

Joan turned over on her face, and the bed shuddered with her tearing sobs. She was not really crying. The crisis was too tense for tears.

"Don't, dear, don't," pleaded Lady Thorndyke, feeling horribly guilty. "I will see you sometimes, and---"

"See me sometimes!" echoed the child. "You are the only person who has ever been kind to me. I can't live without you now. I won't try. Oh, it was cruel to bring me here and show me what happiness could be, just to drive me away again into the dark!"

"But----" the distressed old lady had begun to stammer, when the child slipped out of bed and fell at her protectress's feet.

"Keep me with you!" she implored. "I'll be your servant. I'll live in the kitchen. I'll eat what your dog eats. Only let me stay."

She wound her slim, childish arms round Lady Thorndyke's waist, her eyes streamed with tears at last; her beautiful hair curled piteously over the grey-silk lap. She was at that moment a great actress, for though she was honestly grateful, she neither wished nor intended to live in the kitchen and eat what the dog ate. She would be a child of the house or she would be nothing. Her beauty, her despair, and her humility were irresistible. Lady Thorndyke forgot George Gallon and clasped the child in her arms, crying in sympathy. "If you care so much, dear, how can I let you go?" she whimpered.

"I care enough to die for you, or to die if I lose you!" Joan vowed.

"You shall not die, and you shall not lose me!" exclaimed the old lady, remembering her nephew now and defying him. "You shall stay and be my little girl."

Joan did stay. Before the week ended, and another visit from George Gallon was due, she had so entwined herself round Lady Thorndyke's heart that the rather cowardly old woman had courage to face her nephew with the news that she meant to keep the waif whom "Providence had sent her."

CHAPTER II--The Old Lady's Nephew

At first there was no question of formal adoption. Joan simply stayed on and was allowed to feel that she had a right to stay. Gallon did all he could to oust her, for his mind had telescopic power and brought the future near. He feared the girl, but he dared not actually offend his aunt, lest he should lose at once what he wished to safeguard himself against losing later.

The child made Lady Thorndyke happier than she had ever been. Her presence created sunshine. She was never naughty like other children; she was never sulky nor disagreeable. A governess was procured for her, a mild, common-place lady whom Joan despised and astonished with her progress. "I was born knowing a lot of things which she could never learn," the little girl told herself scornfully. But she did not despise George Gallon, whom she occasionally saw, nor did she exactly fear him, because she believed that she would be able to hold her own in case the day ever came for a second contest, as she foresaw it would.

When she had learned all that the governess knew, and rather more besides, she was sent to a boarding-school in Paris to be "finished." After her first term, she came back to Brighton for the Christmas holidays, so grown up, so beautiful, and so distinguished that Lady Thorndyke was very proud. "What shall I give you for Christmas, my dear?" she asked. "A diamond ring?"

Joan kissed her withered leaf of a hand.

"If you love me," she said, "give me the right to call myself your daughter. That is the one thing in the world you have left me hungry for. Will you adopt me, so that I can feel I am your own, own child? Think what it would be if any one ever claimed me and took me away from you!"

Joan's love was not all a pretence. She would have been a monster if it had been, instead of the mere girl of seventeen she was, with a large nature, and capacities for good which had been stunted and turned the wrong way. But the vicissitudes of life had taught her to be even more observant than she was critical,

and she knew as well how to manage Lady Thorndyke as if the kind old creature had been a marionette, worked with strings. It was not necessary to let her benefactress know all that was in her mind, nor how she had calculated that to be the rich woman's legally adopted daughter ought to mean being her heiress as well. While she pleaded to be Lady Thorndyke's "own, own child," she was saying to herself: "I will make a good deal better use of the money than that hateful George Gallon would."

No normal young man, and no sentimental old lady, could have doubted the disinterestedness of a girl with eyes like Joan Carthew's. Lady Thorndyke was delighted with the dear child's affection, and promptly sent for her lawyer to talk over the matter of a formal adoption. She also announced her intention of altering her will, and leaving only twenty thousand pounds to her nephew, the bulk of her property to Joan, "who would no doubt be greatly surprised."

Thinking it but fair that George should be prepared for this change in his prospects, she told him what she intended to do, in the presence of a friend, lest there should be a scene.

There was no scene, for George was a sensible man, and saw that a little butter on his bread was better than none. But he hated Joan, and respected her at the same time because she had triumphed. He was not quite beaten yet, however. He had a talk, which he hoped sounded manly and frank, with his young rival, told Joan that he bore her no grudge, and paid her a compliment. When she went back to school, flowers and sweets began to arrive from "Cousin George"; and the girl saw the game he was playing and smiled.

When she came home for Easter, he proposed. He got her on a balcony, by moonlight, where he said that he had loved her for years, and could not wait any longer to speak out what was in his heart.

"Your heart!" laughed Joan, with all the insolence of a beautiful, spoiled young heiress of eighteen, who has pined for revenge upon a hated man, and got it at last. "Your heart!" It was delicious to throw policy to the wind for once and be frankly herself. She was thoroughly enjoying the situation, as she stood with the pure radiance of the moonlight shining down upon her bright head and her white, filmy gown. "What a fool you must think me, Mr. Gallon! It's your pockets you would have me fill, not your heart. I acknowledge I have owed you a debt for a long time, but it's not a debt of love. When I was a forlorn, friendless child, you tried to turn me out into the cold; and if I hadn't been stronger than you, you would have succeeded. Instead, it was I who did that. I've always meant to pay, for I hate debts. No, I will not marry you. No; nothing that your aunt means to give me shall be yours. Now I have paid, and we are quits."

George Gallon was cold with fury. "Don't be too sure," he said in his harsh voice, which Joan had always hated. "They laugh best who laugh last."



"No, I will not marry you."

"I know that," the girl retorted; and passing him to go indoors, where Lady Thorndyke dozed after dinner, she threw over her shoulder a laugh to spice her words.

The next day she went back to school, pleased with herself and what she had done, for she was no longer in the least afraid of George Gallon.

Some things are in the air. It was in the air at school that Joan would be a great heiress. The girls were very nice to her, and Joan enjoyed their flatteries, though she saw through them and made no intimate friends. When in June, shortly before the coming of the summer holidays, the girl was telegraphed for, because Lady Thorndyke had had a paralytic stroke and was dying, there was a sensation in the school. Of course, as Joan would now inherit something like a million, she would not return, but after her time of mourning would come out in Society, well chaperoned, be presented, and probably marry at least a viscount. The other girls were nicer than ever; tears were shed over her, and farewell presents bestowed.

When Joan arrived in England, Lady Thorndyke was dead, and the girl was sad, for she realised how well she had loved her benefactress. After the funeral came the reading of the will. The dead woman's adopted daughter, the servants, and George Gallon were the only persons present besides the lawyer. Joan's heart scarcely quickened its beating, for she was absolutely confident. Any surprise which might come could be merely a matter of a few thousands more or less. She sat leaning back in an armchair, very calm and beautiful in her deep mourning. George Gallon's eyes never left her face, and they lit as at last she lifted her head, with bewilderment on the suddenly paling face.

There had been a few bequests to servants and to a favourite charity. Everything else which Lady Thorndyke died possessed of was left unconditionally to her nephew, George Gallon. There was no mention of Joan Carthew. The will was dated ten years before. Lady Thorndyke had put off making the new one, and death had rendered the delay irrevocable. Joan Carthew had not a penny in the world; save for her education, her clothes, and the memory of six happy years, she was no better off than on the day when she threw herself under Lady Thorndyke's carriage.

At first she could not believe that it was true. It was like having rolled a heavy stone almost to the top of an incredibly steep hill, to find oneself suddenly

[image]

"Joan Carthew had not a penny in the world."

at the bottom, crushed under the stone. But the solicitor's stilted sympathy, and the look in George Gallon's eyes, which said: "Now perhaps you are sorry for having made a fool of yourself," brought her roughly face to face with the truth. At the same time she was stimulated. The words, the look, braced her to assume courage, if she had it not.

She was down--very far down; but she was young, she was beautiful, she was brave, and life had early taught her to be unscrupulous. The world was, after all, an oyster; she would open it yet somehow and make it hers; this was a vow.

When the solicitor had gone, George remained. The house was his house now.

"What do you intend to do?" he inquired.

"I have my plans," Joan answered.

In the man's veins stirred a curious thrill, which was something like dread. The girl was wonderful, and formidable still, not to be despised. He half feared her, yet he could not resist the temptation to humiliate the creature who had laughed at him.

"It is a pity you never learned anything useful, like typing and shorthand," said he patronisingly. "If you had, I would have taken you into our office as secretary. There's two pounds a week in the job, and that's better than the wages of a nursery governess, which, in the circumstances, you will, no doubt, be thankful to get. After what has passed between us, you would hardly care, I suppose, to accept charity from me, even if I were inclined to offer it."

"I would take no favour from you," said Joan, in an odd, excited voice. "But I *will* accept that secretaryship; you'll find me competent."

George stared. "You don't know what you are talking about. You have no knowledge of typing or shorthand."

"I am expert in both. I thought, as a woman with large property, the accomplishments might be useful to me, and I insisted on taking them up at school instead of one or two others more classical but not as practical."

"You would actually come and work in my office, almost as a menial, on a salary of two pounds a week, while I enjoy the million you expected would be yours?"

"Beggars mustn't be choosers," returned Joan, drily. "You don't withdraw the offer?"

"No-o," replied George slowly, doubtful whether his scheme of humiliation had been quite wise, yet finding a certain pleasure in it still. "The girl's expression is queer," he said to himself. "She looks as if she had something up her sleeve."

He was right. Joan had something "up her sleeve," something too small to be visible, yet large enough, perhaps, to be the seed of fortune.

CHAPTER III--A Deal in Clerios

George Gallon had lately left a well-known firm of stockbrokers, in which he had been junior partner, and set up business on his own account. He had started at a trying time, about the close of the Boer war, when the financial world was in a state of depression; but he had since brought off two or three *coups* for his clients and himself, and though he was unpopular, he had begun to be talked of among a limited circle in the City as a man who would succeed.

Joan Carthew had heard "George's luck" discussed by guests at Lady Thorndyke's, when she had been at home from school on her holidays; therefore it was that she had so promptly accepted the offer thrown to her in derision, as a bone is flung to a chained dog. "If I keep my eyes and ears open, I shall get tips," was the thought that flashed into her mind.

If Joan had been an ordinary eighteen-year-old girl, she would have faltered before the difficulty of turning such "tips" to her own advantage, on a salary of two pounds a week; but she would not have entered George Gallon's service if she had been one to falter before difficulties; and three days after the reading of the will which left the girl a pensioner on her own wits, she presented herself at the office in Copthall Court.

It was early, and Gallon had not yet arrived. However, his curiosity to see whether Joan would really keep her engagement brought him to the City half an hour earlier than usual. When he came in, there sat at an inner office, at the desk used by his late stenographer, a young woman plainly dressed in black, though not in mourning deep enough to depress the spirits of the beholder.

It was Joan Carthew. She had already taken off her hat and hung it on a peg. Gallon noticed instantly that her beautiful golden-brown hair was dressed more simply than he had seen it. Every detail of her costume was suited to the new part she was about to play--that of the business woman.

"Good morning, Mr. Gallon," she said crisply. "Your head clerk told me this would be my desk. I have brought my own typewriter. I hope you don't mind. You know, from the test you made the other day, that I take down quickly from dictation, and that my typing is clear. I am ready to begin work whenever you are."

"Glad to find you so businesslike," said Gallon, uncomfortable in spite of himself, though there was a keen relish in the situation.

"You will, I hope, never find me anything else," quietly replied Joan.

So the new *régime* began. At first, for some days, the man was ill at ease, could not collect his thoughts for dictation, and stammered in his speech. He regretted that his desire to humiliate the girl had tempted him to offer this position; but Joan's attitude was so tactful, so unobtrusive, that little by little he forgot his awkwardness and even the meanness of his motive in making her his dependent. He almost forgot that he had ever asked her to marry him; and because he found her astonishingly clever and useful, he waived the idea of further insults which had flitted through his head when first the dethroned heiress became his secretary.

One autumn morning, Gallon was late. Joan sat waiting in his office, and had opened such correspondence as was not marked "Private," had typed several letters ready for her employer's signature, and having no more business which could be transacted until he appeared, began to glance through an illustrated Society weekly which she took in. This paper she always read with eagerness; not because she had the morbid interest of an outsider in the doings of Society, with a capital S, but because any information she could glean about important people might be of service in the career to which she undauntedly looked forward.

On one page of this particular paper, country houses, electric-launches, libraries, motor-cars, and even family jewels were advertised; and it was an absorbing page to Joan. To-day she gazed long at the reproduction of a handsome steam-yacht, which for some weeks past had been advertised for sale, for the sum of twelve thousand pounds. Only a few months ago, she had been planning to have some day a yacht of her own. It had been one of the many pleasant things she had meant to do with Lady Thorndyke's money.

"I shouldn't mind owning the *Titania*, if she's as good as her photograph," the girl was thinking, when George Gallon and a fat, foreign-looking man came in.

"You can go back into the next room, Miss Carthew," said George, abruptly.

"I shall not need you at present, and you may tell them outside that I am not to be disturbed."

Joan rose and walked into the outer office, where the three clerks, who were all more or less in love with the beautiful secretary, glanced up joyfully from their work at sight of her. The youngest, whose desk was close to the door, had already proposed. He was a dreamy youth with a fluffy brain, but his father was a rich man known in the City as "the Salmon King," who cherished hopes that one day his son would cut a figure on the Stock Exchange. These family details the young man had confided to Joan as a lure to matrimony, and though she had answered that he was a "foolish boy," and nothing was farther from her intention than to settle down as Mrs. Tommy Mellis, she had not in so many words refused the honour.

Now she whispered a request that, if he had still a regard for her, he would slip away and buy a box of chocolates, for the need of which she was perishing. A moment later Tommy was out of his chair, and Joan was in it. His was the one seat in the room where conversation in Gallon's private office could by any means be overheard; and Gallon was aware that whatever might go in at Tommy's right ear promptly went out at the left, without leaving the smallest impression of its meaning.

"Is the deal certain to come off?" she heard George inquire.

"Sure as the sun is to rise to-morrow," replied another voice with a foreign accent. "You are the only outsider in the know. That's worth something, isn't it?"

"It's worth what I've promised for it."

"At least that. And I want an advance to-day."

"In such a hurry? Remember I shan't make anything, or be sure you haven't fooled me, for weeks. Still, I can manage a hundred."

"I need ten times that."

"You'll have it the day the Clerios are taken over."

"Sh! not so loud! And no names, for Heaven's sake, man!"

"Oh, that's all right. The clerk near the door is a fool. The only one out there with any real brains is a girl, but she doesn't know the difference between Clerios and clerics. That's why I employ a woman for a secretary. She spends her spare energy on the fashions, and doesn't bother about things which are none of her business."

In spite of this protest, Gallon dropped his voice. Only a word here and there started out of the broken murmurs on the other side of the door; but one more sentence, almost whole, came to her ears. "Grierson Mordaunt ... sort of chap ... carries these things through." Then reappeared Tommy with the chocolates, and Joan went to her own desk; but the stray bits of information were as flint and steel in her brain, and together they struck out a spark of inspiration. She

was as sure as if she had heard all details of the transaction that the World's Shipping Combine, of which the American millionaire, Grierson Mordaunt, stood at the head, had arranged to take over the Clerio line of Italian boats plying between Mediterranean ports. The fat man with the foreign accent was no doubt the confidential agent of the Italian company, and being acquainted with George Gallon and his methods, had given the secret away for a consideration. Doubtless he was poor, perhaps in difficulties; otherwise he would have kept the information and bought all the Clerio shares he could lay his hands upon.

Now Joan knew why Gallon had written yesterday to a man in Manchester, asking him how many Clerios he had to sell, and what was the lowest price he was prepared to take for them, adding that it would be useless, in the present depressed state of the market, to name a high figure. This man had been requested to wire his answer, and at any moment it might arrive.

When Joan had jumped so far in her conclusions, Gallon escorted his visitor out, flinging back word that he would be in again in half an hour.

The girl's blood sang in her ears. It seemed to her that Fortune was knocking at the door; but could she find the key to open it? She called all her wits to the rescue, and in five minutes that key was grating in the lock.

In Gallon's private room was a small desk, which she used when her services were wanted there. This gave her an excuse to go in, and in passing she threw a glance at Tommy Mellis, which caused him, after the lapse of a decent interval (he counted eighty seconds), to follow.

"Once you said you would do anything for me," she began, with a lovely look. "Did you mean it?"

"Rather!"

"Well, then, the next question is: Will your father do anything for *you*?"

"He'll do a good deal."

"If you tell him you've a tip about some shares that are bound to rise, will he give you the money to buy them?"

"He'd lend it. That's his way. He'd be tickled to see me taking an interest in business. But what has that got to do with----"

"I want to buy some shares--lots of shares--all I can get hold of. To-day they're going cheap. To-morrow, who can say? They are Clerios."

"But, look here, even I know that Clerios are no good. It's a badly managed line, and the shares are down to next to nothing."

"All the better. Mr. Gallon mustn't know you are in this, as he wants to get hold of all the shares himself. You must trust me enough to have them put into my name, and when I've got your profit for you, we'll go halves. Can you see your father inside half an hour?"

"His place is just round the corner."

"Well, then, if you *do* care anything for me, ask him to see you through a big deal. You shall really make on it, I promise you, something worth having besides my--gratitude."

"The governor's a queer fish. If I should let him in----"

"You won't let him in. But we don't want your father or anybody else in with us. All we want is the loan, and his name, which is a good one in the City, I know. I trust you for that. You must show how clever you are, if you're anxious to please me. I'll manage the rest. Now, like a dear, good boy, run off and arrange things with your father."

Again Tommy became knight-errant, and hardly was he out of the way when a strange voice was heard in the adjoining office. "Mr. Gallon in? I'm Mr. Mitchison, from Manchester."

"Mr. Gallon is out at present, but----" a clerk had begun, when Joan appeared and cut him short. "Mr. Gallon wishes me to see Mr. Mitchison, in his absence. Will you kindly step in here, sir?"

The gentleman from Manchester obeyed. Joan's quick eyes noted his worried air and the genteel shabbiness of his clothing. "I am Mr. Gallon's confidential secretary," she said. "I know about this business of Clerios. You came instead of wiring? Mr. Gallon rather expected you would."

"I had to come to London in a day or two, anyhow, and it's always more satisfactory to do business in person."

"Exactly. Well, I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Gallon has seen reason to change his mind about buying your block of shares in the Clerio line, as he has some big things on now, and finds his hands full; but Mr. Mellis, a client of his--'the Salmon King,' you know--wants to invest some money privately for his son. Mr. Gallon has advised them that, though Clerios are not likely to rise much for some years, there is a certain, if small, dividend; and if you can tell young Mr. Mellis where they can get hold of other blocks of the same shares, it might then be worth his while to take over yours. Those you hold are hardly enough for him without others."

"I know several men in Genoa, where I did business for some years, who hold shares and would part with them for a decent price. I could work the deal for Mr. Mellis, I'm certain."

"Good. He's at his father's office now. I have Mr. Gallon's permission to introduce you to him, but his only free time this morning is in the next half-hour. I can go with you to Mr. Mellis senior's office, if you're inclined to settle matters at once."

"The Salmon King," who had earned his title by building up the largest "canned goods" business of its kind in England, had offices on the ground floor of an imposing building not far away, and Joan was lucky enough to guide her

companion to the door without the dreaded misfortune of meeting George Gallon on the way. As they crossed the threshold, Tommy Mellis issued from a room with a ground-glass door. Joan hurried to him, asked if his father had been kind, was assured that all was well so far, and hastened to explain the new development of affairs so clearly that even Tommy's slow intelligence grasped her meaning without difficulty. "When I've introduced you to Mr. Mitchison, offer him twenty pounds a share (their nominal value is fifty), and if necessary go up to twenty-five. Tell him he shall have a commission on all the other shares he can get, if the whole thing can be fixed up by wire to-morrow. Say there is a man coming to see you the day after about some other investment, which your father prefers, but you've taken a fancy to this, and want everything settled before the two older men come together. As Gallon must do all his business in Clerios privately, and doesn't want to ask for them in the House, that will give us time to work."

"By Jove! this will mean a lot of money," faltered Tommy. "Of course, I'm delighted to do this for you, but if the governor---"

Joan soothed his fears; and introduced Mitchison to young Mellis, who took them both into a small, empty office. She hovered about during the business conversation which ensued, putting in a word here and there, and impressing the Manchester man with her shrewdness. In his opinion, George Gallon had a treasure for a secretary, and he was grateful to her for pushing on his affairs so well, especially as he did not believe he could have got from Gallon the price which Mellis was willing to give.

When Joan returned to the office in Copthall Court, her employer had not yet come back. "Don't tell Mr. Gallon I've been out, will you?" she appealed to the clerks, her slaves. As she spoke, the door opened, and Gallon entered, just in time to hear the ingenuous request. The young men flushed in consternation for her, but the girl did not change colour. As a matter of fact, she had known that George was coming up, and had probably seen her on the stairs. She had not spoken without design.

Having been delayed vexatiously, Gallon was not in a good mood, and his black ones were unpleasant for underlings. A frowning look and a gesture of the head called Joan to his private office. She followed meekly; but when the scolding had reached the stage which she mentally designated as "ripe," her meekness vanished like snow in sunshine.

"How dare you speak to me like that!" she exclaimed, her eyes blazing. "I'm not your servant, though I have served you well. I leave to-day."

"This moment, if you choose," George flung back at her furiously, though in reality he had not intended matters to touch this climax. Joan had become valuable, but, as he said to himself in his sullen anger, she was the "last person in the world whose impudence he would stand."

When Joan had gathered up her few belongings, and remarked that she would send for her typewriter, she added: "Mr. Mitchison, of Manchester, called, and wanted me to tell you that he'd already parted with the shares you wired about last night. I asked who had bought them, but he was pledged to secrecy. I believe that is all I need say, except that you will find all your correspondence in good order, to be taken over by my successor; and as you have declared so often that clever stenographers are starving for want of employment, you will not be long in obtaining one."

With this she was off, and, hailing the first cab she saw (though in her circumstances a cab was an extravagance), drove to Woburn Place, where she lived in a back bedroom on the top floor of a cheap boarding-house.

She remained only long enough, however, to change into one of the pretty dresses left from last spring's wardrobe. Looking as if her home should be Park Lane instead of Bloomsbury, she went to the office of the illustrated weekly in which she had been interested that morning. When she inquired the address of *Titania*'s owner, she was told that all business connected with the yacht would be done at the advertising bureau of the paper. This was a blow, for the proposal that Joan had to make was not, perhaps, of a kind suited to the taste of a mere commonplace agent. She thought for a moment, and then said, with a slight accent which she had learned through mimicking a girl at school: "Well, I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid we can't do business, then. I'm an American girl; my name is Mordaunt. Grierson Mordaunt is my uncle. I guess you've heard of him. I want to buy a yacht, in a hurry--my people generally are in a hurry--and I thought this one might do. But if I can't see the owner myself, it's no use. *Good morning.*"

[image]

"Looking as if her home should be Park Lane instead of Bloomsbury, she went to the office."

Before she had got half-way to the door the dapper manager of the advertising bureau stopped her. Possibly an exception might be made in her favour; he would write to his client.

"Can you send the letter by district messenger?" shrewdly asked the newly-fledged Miss Mordaunt.

The manager admitted that this could be done. To what hotel should he transmit the answer? "I'm staying with friends, and I don't want them to know about this till it's settled," said Joan. "I tell you what I'll do: I'll wait here."

CHAPTER IV--The Steam Yacht *Titania*

She did wait, for three-quarters of an hour; and at the end of that time the manager received a reply to his letter. In consequence, he told Joan that Lady John Bevan would see her at Kensington Park Mansions.

As soon as the girl heard the name of Lady John Bevan, she knew why the yacht was for sale, and was hopeful that the eccentric proposition she meant to make might be received with favour. Lord John Bevan was in prison, for the crime of forgery, committed after losing a fortune at Monte Carlo.

Joan took another cab to Kensington Park Mansions--a mean shelter for a woman whose environment had once been brilliant. But Lady John, a tall and peculiarly elegant woman, shone out like a jewel in an unworthy setting. The two women looked at each other with admiration, and there was eagerness in the elder's voice as she said: "You want to buy the *Titania*, Miss Mordaunt?"

"I'm not sure yet, till I've tried, to see how I like her," replied Joan. "That's fair, isn't it? What I want, if I see the yacht, take fancy to her, and we can come to terms, is to hire the *Titania* for a while. Then, at the end of that time, if I don't buy her myself, I'll sell her for you to somebody else; that's a promise. What would you want for your yacht for a couple of months, all in working order, and the captain and crew's money included?"

"Five hundred pounds," returned Lady John. "You can see her at Cowes."

"Well, I don't mind telling you that's more than I expected. I'm G. B. Mordaunt's niece, and some day I suppose I shall be one of the richest women in America, but my money's tied up till I'm twenty-five. I've only an allowance, and Uncle Grierson, who is my guardian, is hard as nails. I'll tell you what I can do, though. I have some shares which are worth a lot of money, but I don't want to deal with them myself, as their value is a secret, and my uncle would be mad with me if he knew I was using it. What I was going to say is this. The shares I speak of are worth mighty little to those who aren't 'in the know,' and a lot to those who

are. If you'll call to-morrow morning at ten o'clock on a stockbroker in the City, whose address I'll give you, and tell him you've a block of Clerios to dispose of, he'll jump at the offer. All you must do is to stand firm, and you can get eight hundred pounds out of him. If he says they're no good, just let your eyes twinkle and tell him G. B. Mordaunt's niece has been talking to you. That will settle Mr. George Gallon! Keep your five hundred for the yacht, and give the three hundred change to me. Of course, this is provided I like the yacht. You give me an order to see her at Cowes. I'll start at once, wire you what I think of her, and, if it's all right, I'll call here first thing in the morning with the share certificates."

Carried away by the girl's magnetism and dash, Lady John Bevan would have said "Yes" to almost anything. She said "Yes" now with a promptness which surprised herself when she thought of it afterwards, by the cold light of reason.

Joan arrived at Cowes before dark, and was delighted with the *Titania* and her crew. She wired her approval to Lady John, and telegraphed Tommy Mellis, asking him to meet her at Waterloo for the eleven o'clock train from Southampton, bringing the share certificates which had that morning been Mitchison's. She was sure that Tommy would not fail, and he did not. They had supper together in the grill-room of the Carlton, as Joan was not in evening dress. She told him all she chose to tell, and no more; and thus ended the busiest day of Joan Carthew's life.

The transaction in which Lady John Bevan was to act as catspaw came off next morning as the girl had expected, and she would have given something handsome if she could have seen George Gallon's face when he found himself obliged to pay, for the very shares he had expected to obtain yesterday, four times what he had intended to offer Mitchison. His profit would now be small, when the great *coup* came off; still, he could not afford to refuse the chance, and Joan knew it. Some day, she meant that he should also know to whom he owed his defeat; but that day was not yet.

For the shares sold by Mitchison he had received two hundred pounds. A like sum Joan agreed to place in Tommy's hands, as part profit of the transaction; and when Lady John Bevan was paid for the two months' hire of the *Titania*, the girl would have a hundred pounds over, to "play with," as she expressed it to herself. The other shares which Mitchison was pledged to obtain from Genoa would be available within the next few days, and Joan had made up her mind what to do with them by and by. She had had several inspirations since overhearing snatches of conversation between her employer and his Italian visitor yesterday morning, and one of these inspirations concerned Lady John Bevan.

Lady John was pitied by the old friends in the old life from which poverty and misfortune had removed her. People would have been glad to be "nice" to her in any cheap way which did not cost too much money or trouble, if she had let them. But the woman was a proud woman, who still loved her husband in spite

of his guilt, and she had not cared to go out of her hired flat in Kensington to be patronised by the world which had once flattered and fought for her invitations. Joan guessed as much of this as she did not know, and when Lady John wished her, rather wistfully, a "pleasant cruise," the girl said suddenly: "Come along and be my chaperon! My aunt Caroline, Uncle Grierson Mordaunt's sister, came to England with me; but she hates the sea, and flatly refuses to do any yachting. I'm not sorry, because she's a prim old dear, and what I want is to see a little life and fun. I've been kept very close till now, and though I'm of age, I'm only just out, so I don't know many people, and you would be sure to meet lots of nice friends of yours, to whom you'd introduce me. It's so foggy and horrid here now; I'm going to make straight for the Riviera with the *Titania*, and it will do you good. Please come."

Lady John could not resist the prospect, or that "Please," spoken cooingly, with lovely, pleading eyes and a childlike touch on her arm. Besides, she was fond of the *Titania*, and before she quite knew what she was doing, she had promised to chaperon Grierson Mordaunt's niece.

Considering the way in which she was handicapped by false pretences and shortness of cash, Joan could not have done better for herself. She told Lady John that she had had a disagreement with the friends with whom she had been staying, and wished to be recommended to a hotel for the few days before they could get off on the *Titania*. Of course, Lady John invited her to the flat, and the girl accepted. She asked her new chaperon's advice about dressmakers and milliners for the Riviera outfit, which must be got together in a hurry. Lady John had paid all her own bills after the crash, with money grudgingly supplied by relations, and was still in the "good books" of the tradespeople she had once lavishly patronised. Introduced by her as a niece of the well-known American millionaire, Joan had unlimited credit to procure unlimited pretty things. Everything had to be bought ready made; and at the end of the week the steam-yacht *Titania*, with "Miss Jenny Mordaunt" and Lady John Bevan on board, was bounding gaily over the bright waters of the Bay. A few days later, the *Titania* made one of a colony of other yachts lying snugly in Nice harbour.

Now, Joan's wisdom in the choice of a chaperon justified itself even more pointedly than when it had been a question of a pilot among shoals of tradespeople. Lady John believed in her young charge, whose statements concerning her engaging self it had never occurred to the elder woman to doubt. Having undertaken the duties of a chaperon, she was conscientious in carrying them out, and lost no time in picking up old friendships which might be valuable to Miss Mordaunt--just how valuable, or in what way, Lady John little dreamed.

Not only did she know a number of rich and titled English folk, who had come out to spend the cold months at their villas, or in fashionable hotels, at Nice,

Monte Carlo, and Mentone, but she could claim acquaintance with various foreign royalties and personages of high degree. These latter especially were delighted to meet the beautiful American girl, who was so rich and independent that she travelled about the world on her own yacht. It was nobody's business that the *Titania* was but hired for two months, since it was Miss Mordaunt's pleasure to pose as the owner. The name of the yacht had been changed, for politic reasons, since gay Lord John had careered about the waterways of the world in her; she had been newly decorated, and the colour of her paint had undergone a change, therefore she could pass unrecognised by all save experts. Joan and her chaperon kept "open house" on board. The luncheon-table was always laid for twelve, in case any one strolled on in the morning whom it would be agreeable to detain. On fine days--and what days were not fine on these shores beloved of the sun?--tea was always served on deck under the rose-and-white awning; and Russian princes, Austrian barons and baronesses, French counts and countesses, with a sprinkling of the English nobility, came early and stayed late to drink the Orange Pekoe and eat the exquisite little cakes provided by the confiding tradespeople of Nice. Joan paid for nothing, and got everything. Was she not a great American heiress, and was not the yacht alone a guarantee of her trustworthiness?

Not even the owners of famous American yachts lying alongside suspected the girl to be other than she seemed, though they were of the world in which Grierson Mordaunt was prominent. He was not a man who made intimate friends, and none of those who knew him best had any reason to doubt that he had a pretty niece named Jenny. Concerning the great Mordaunt himself Joan kept posted as to his whereabouts. She read the papers and followed his movements in Florida; therefore she felt safe and pursued her business more or less calmly.

For it was business more than pleasure which had brought the girl on this adventure, though she knew how to combine the two. Her hospitality, her breakfasts, her tea and cakes, her lavish dinners, were not supplied to her guests for nothing, though they were not aware that they were paying save by the honour of their presence. When Joan had established friendly relations with a person worth cultivating (she abjured all others), her next step was to drop a careless word about a wonderful "tip" she had got from Grierson Mordaunt. "It's all in the family," she would say, laughing, "or he would never have given it away; and, of course, I mustn't. He just said to me: 'Buy up a certain thing while you can get it,' and I did. My goodness! I've got more than I know what to do with, for, after all, I had more money than I wanted before. By and by I shall be *too* rich. Mercy! I'm afraid now of being married for my money."

Then the hearers, dazzled by this fairy story, wondered whether they might possibly ask Miss Mordaunt if they could profit by the marvellous "tip," and pick up a few crumbs from her overflowing table. If Joan had hawked her wares, no doubt

these people would have fought shy; but as the object was difficult of attainment and must be manoeuvred for, according to the way of the world they struggled for it with eagerness. As soon as Joan could decently appear to understand, in her innocence, what her dear friends were driving at, she was so "good-natured" that she volunteered to sell them a few of her own shares. The only promise she exacted in return was that nobody would boast of the favour granted. The shares which she had bought at a low price--not yet paid--she sold for three times their face value, sent half the profit to Tommy Mellis as she got it in, and pocketed her own half. She was thus able to pay the tradespeople who had trusted her, and to lay in coal for the trips round the coast which the *Titania* often took with a few distinguished passengers.

The girl could have sung for joy over the success of her adventure. In the end she would cheat nobody; she would make a decent sum for herself, and meanwhile she was drinking the intoxicating nectar of excitement. She was so happy that when she had finished her business, sold all her shares, and the two months for which the *Titania* was hired were drawing to an end she longed to stay on. She was her own mistress, and could pay her way now--at least, for awhile, until she had another stroke of luck, which her confidence in herself enabled her to count upon as certain. She and Lady John were having a "good time," everybody liked them, and she did not see why this good time should not go on indefinitely. Besides, she had promised to sell the yacht for its owner. The two ladies of the *Titania* had invitations for a month ahead, and one evening were dressed and waiting for the arrival of an English bishop, a Roman prince, two American trust magnates, and a French duchess and her daughter, when the name of Mr. Grierson Mordaunt was announced.

Joan's blood rushed to her head, but she stood up smiling. "Leave us for a minute, dear," she breathed to Lady John, who slipped off to her cabin unsuspectingly. The girl found herself facing a grizzled, smooth-shaven man with a prominent chin, a large nose, and deep eyes of iron grey which matched his hair and faded skin.

"So you are the young woman who has been trading on a supposed relationship to me?" remarked Grierson Mordaunt, looking her up and down from head to foot.

"We are related--through Adam," replied Joan, whose lips were dry. "As for 'trading' on the relationship, I'm proud of it, and I don't see why you should be ashamed of me. I've done nothing to disgrace you."

"What is your game, that you should have selected my particular branch of the Adam family?"

"Because I have one of your family secrets. If you are going to disown me, there's no reason why I shouldn't give it away."

"What are you talking about?"

"Clerios. You aren't ready for the secret of that deal to come out yet, are you? I saw in the paper the other day that you had denied any intention of taking the Clerio line into your combine. It was the same paper that said you had just returned to New York from Florida."

"You are an adventuress, my young friend."

"Every seeker of fortune is an adventurer or an adventuress. The crime is, failure. I'm not a criminal, because I am succeeding, and my success has enabled me to meet my obligations. If you don't think that I was justified in claiming relationship with you through so remote an ancestor in common as Adam, you can make the rest of my stay here very uncomfortable, I admit; and if you have no fellow-feeling for a beginner, I suppose you will do it."

"How long do you intend your stay to be?" inquired Mordaunt grimly, but with a twinkle in his eye.

"How long do you want it kept dark about Clerios?"

"A fortnight."

"Then I should like very much, if you don't mind, to stop here a fortnight."

The great man laughed. "You've the pluck of--the Evil One!" he ejaculated. "I was in Paris, and read about one of my niece's smart dinner-parties, so I came on--especially to see you. Now----"

"Now you are here, won't you stop to one of the dinner-parties? Some very nice people are coming this evening."

"And play the part of fond uncle? No, I thank you. But, by Jove! I'm hanged if I don't go away without unmasking you. You may bless your pretty face and your smart tongue for that----"

"And the family secret."

"That's part of it, but not all. I give you a fortnight's grace. Mind, not a day more; and respect the character you've stolen meanwhile, or the promise doesn't stand. This day fortnight you clear out, and Miss Jenny Mordaunt must never be heard of again."

"It's a bargain," said Joan. "By some other name I shall be as great."

"So long as it's not mine. Have you done well with Clerios?"

"Pretty well, thank you. I was a little hampered for lack of capital. I might get you a few shares here in Nice, if you like; not cheap, exactly--still, a good deal lower than they will be a fortnight from now."

"Much obliged. You needn't trouble yourself. But I shall keep my eye on you."

"I shall consider it a compliment," said Joan, "and try to be worthy of it."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

When he was gone, Joan sank into a chair and closed her eyes. It would have been a comfort to faint, but the first guest arrived at that moment, and she rose to them and to the occasion. The dinner was a great success, and every one was grieved to hear that the *Titania* was due to steam away--for a destination unmentioned--in a fortnight.

CHAPTER V--The Landlady at Woburn Place

Joan had no difficulty in selling *Titania* for Lady John Bevan, to a Swiss millionaire, the proprietor of a popular chocolate, who was disporting himself on the Riviera that winter. The yacht was to be delivered to him at Corsica, so that when the charming Miss Mordaunt and her chaperon steamed out of Nice Harbour, none of those who bade them farewell needed to know that *Titania* was to be disposed of. If they found out afterwards, it did not matter much to Joan. After her the Deluge.

The girl had grown fond of Lady John Bevan, and could not bear to exchange her friend's warm affection and gratitude for contempt. Therefore she made up a pretty little fiction about an unexpected summons to America, and parted from Lady John, with mutual regret, at Ajaccio. Joan's one grief in this connexion was that Miss Mordaunt would scarcely be able to keep her promise to write from New York; but this grief was only one of the rain-drops in that "deluge" which had to fall after the vanishing of the American heiress.

If she had been prudent, Joan might have come out of this adventure with a small fortune after sending Tommy Mellis his share of the spoil; but she had been intoxicated with success, and had spent lavishly, as money came from the sale of the shares. She made a good commission on the "deal" with the yacht, which she sold for a somewhat larger sum than Lady John had asked; but where a less generous young person might have closed the episode with thousands, Joan Carthew had only hundreds. She had also, however, many smart dresses, some jewellery, and the memory of an exciting experience. Besides, the money she kept had been got easily, in addition to the joy of her adventure.

It had been in the girl's mind, perhaps, that she might, as Miss Mordaunt, capture a fortune and a title; but in this regard, and this only, the episode of the *Titania* had proved a failure. She had had plenty of proposals, to be sure; but the men who were rich were either too old, too ugly, or too vulgar to suit the fastidious young woman who called the world her oyster; and the titles laid at her feet were all sadly in need of the gilding which a genuine American heiress might have supplied for the sake of becoming a Russian princess or a French *duchesse*.

So Miss Mordaunt disappeared from the brilliant world where she had glittered like a star; and at about the same time, Miss Joan Carthew (who had nothing to conceal) appeared at her old quarters in Woburn Place. She went back there for two reasons; indeed, Joan had bought her experience of life too dearly to do anything without a reason. The first was because she wished to lie hid for awhile, spending no unnecessary money until the twilight of uncertainty should brighten into the dawn of inspiration and show her the next step on the ladder which she was determined to mount. The second reason was that the landlady--a quite exceptional person for a landlady--had been kind, and Joan desired to reward her.

If the girl had not gone back to Woburn Place, her whole future might have been different. But--she did go back, and arrived in the midst of a crisis. Since Joan had vanished, some months ago, bad luck had come into the house and finally opened the door for the bailiff.

Joan found the landlady in tears; but to explain the fulness of the girl's sympathy, the landlady must be described.

In the first place, she *was* a lady; and she was young and pretty, though a widow. Her husband had been the Honourable Richard Fitzpatrick, the scapegrace son of a penniless Irish viscount. "Dishonourable Dick," as he was sometimes nicknamed behind his back, had gone to California to make his fortune, had naturally failed, but had succeeded in marrying an exceedingly pretty girl, an orphan, with ten thousand pounds of her own. He had brought her to England, had spent most of her money on the race-course, and would have spent the rest, had it not occurred to him that it would be good sport to do a little fighting in South Africa. He had volunteered, and soon after died of enteric.

Meanwhile, the Honourable Mrs. Fitzpatrick was at a boarding-house in Woburn Place, where the landlord and landlady were so kind to her that she gladly lent them several hundred pounds, not knowing yet that she had only a few other hundreds left out of her little fortune.

Suddenly the blow fell. Within three days Marian Fitzpatrick learned that she was a widow, that her dead husband had employed the short interval of their married life in getting rid of almost everything she had; and that, her landlord and landlady being bankrupt, she could not hope for the return of the three-hundred-pound loan she had made them.

It was finally arranged, as the best thing to be done, that she should take over the lease of the boarding-house and try to get back what she had lost, by "running" the establishment herself.

Mrs. Fitzpatrick had just shouldered this somewhat incongruous burden, when Joan Carthew had been attracted to the house by the brightness of the gilt lettering over the door, and the pretty, fresh curtains in the windows. Joan was nineteen, and Marian Fitzpatrick twenty-three. The two had been drawn to one another with the first meeting of their eyes. When, after a few weeks' acquaintance, the girl had been told the young widow's story, her interest and sympathy were keenly aroused, for Joan's heart was not hard except to the rich, most of whom she conceived to be less deserving, if more fortunate, than herself. Now, when she came back fresh from her triumphant campaign on the *Côte d'Azur*, to hear that things had gone from bad to worse, all the latent chivalry in her really generous nature was aroused.

Joan was tall as a young goddess brought up on the heights of Olympus, instead of at a French boarding-school. Despite the hardships and wretchedness of her childhood, she was strong in body and mind and spirit, with the strength of perfect nerves and a splendid vitality. Marian Fitzpatrick, broken by disappointment, and worn by months of anxiety, was fragile and white as a lily which has been bent by savage storms, and the sight of her small, pale face and big, sad, brown eyes fired the girl with an almost fierce determination to assume the rôle of protector.

"I've got money," she reflected, in mental defiance of the Fate with whom she had waged war since childish days, "and I can make more when this is gone. I suppose I'm a fool, but I don't care a rap. I'm going to help Marian Fitzpatrick, and perhaps make her fortune, as I mean to make my own. But just for the present, mine can wait, and hers can't."

Aloud, she asked Marian what sum would tide her over present difficulties. Two hundred and fifty pounds, it appeared, were needed. Joan promptly volunteered to lend, on one condition, but she was cut short before she had time to name it.

"Condition or no condition, you dear girl, I can't let you do it," sobbed Marian. "I'm perfectly sure I could never pay. I'm in a quicksand and bound to sink. Nobody can pull me out."

"I can," said Joan; "and in doing it, I'll show you how to pay me. You just listen to what I have to say, and don't interrupt. When I get an inspiration, I tell you, it's worth hearing, and I've got one now. What I want you to do is to give up trying to manage this house. You're too young and pretty and soft-hearted for a landlady, and you haven't the talent for it, though you have plenty in other ways, and one is, to be charming. My inspiration will show you how best to utilise that

talent."

Then Joan talked on, and at first Marian was shocked and horrified; but in the end the force of the girl's extraordinary magnetism and self-confidence subdued her. She ceased to protest. She even laughed, and a stain of rose colour came back to her cheeks. It would be very awful and alarming, and perhaps wicked, to do what Joan Carthew proposed, but it would be tremendously exciting and interesting; and there was enough youthful love of mischief left in her to enjoy an adventure with a kind of fearful joy, especially when all the responsibility was shouldered by another stronger than herself.

The first thing to do towards the carrying out of the great plan was to get some one to manage the boarding-house in Mrs. Fitzpatrick's place. This was difficult, for competent and honest managers, male or female, were not to be found at registry-offices, like cooks; but Joan was (or thought she was) equal to this emergency as well as others. She sorted out from the dismal rag-bag of her early Brighton experiences the memory of a wonderful woman who had done something to make life tolerable for her when she was the forlorn drudge of Mrs. Boyle's lodging-house at 12, Seafoam Terrace.

This wonderful woman had been one of two sisters who kept a rival lodging-house in Seafoam Terrace. The Misses Witt owned the place, consequently it was not improbable that they were still to be found there, after these seven years; and as they had not always agreed together, it seemed possible that the younger Miss Witt (the clever and nice one, who had given occasional cakes and bulls'-eyes to Joan in those bad old days) might be prevailed upon to accept an independent position, with a salary, in London.

Joan had always promised herself that, when she was rich and prosperous, she would sweep into the house of her bondage like a young princess, and bestow favours upon little Minnie Boyle, whom she had loved. But Lady Thorndyke had not wished her adopted daughter even to remember the sordid past; and after the death of her benefactress, the girl had not until lately been in a position to undertake the *rôle* of fairy princess. Even now, to be sure, she was not rich, but she swam on the tide of success, and she had at least the air of dazzling prosperity. She dressed herself in a way to make Mrs. Boyle grovel, and bought a first-class ticket, one Friday afternoon, for Brighton. She took her seat in an empty carriage, and hardly had she opened a magazine when a man got in. It was George Gallon; and if he had wished to get out again on recognising his travelling companion, there would not have been time for him to do so, as at that moment the train began to move out of the station.

These two had not seen each other since the eventful morning when Joan had resigned her position as Mr. Gallon's secretary. She was not sure whether she were sorry or glad to see him now, but the situation had its dramatic ele-

ment. George spoke stiffly, and Joan responded with malicious cordiality. Knowing nothing of her identity with Grierson Mordaunt's brilliant niece, long pent-up curiosity forced the man to ask questions as to where she had been and what she had been doing.

"I have an interest in a London boarding-house, and am going to Brighton to try and engage a manageress," Joan deigned to reply, with a twinkle under her long eyelashes. "I forgot that you would of course have kept on the old place at Brighton. I suppose you are going down for the week-end?"

George admitted grimly that this was the case, and as Joan would give only tantalising glimpses of her doings in the last few months, and seemed inclined to put impish questions about the office she had left, he took refuge in a newspaper. Joan calmly read her magazine, and not another word was exchanged until the train had actually come to a stop in the Brighton station. "Oh! by the way," the girl exclaimed then, as if on a sudden thought. "It was I who got hold of those Clerios I believe you had an idea of buying in so very cheap. I knew you could afford to pay well if you wanted them. One gets these little tips, you know, in an office like yours. That's why I snapped at your two pounds a week. Good-bye. I hope you'll enjoy the sea air at dear Brighton."

Before George Gallon could find breath to answer, she was gone, and he was left to anathematise the hand-luggage which must be given to a porter. By the time it was disposed of, the impertinent young woman had disappeared. Yet there is a difference between disappearing and escaping. Joan's little impulsive stab had made Gallon more her enemy than ever, and perhaps the day might come when she would have to regret the small satisfaction of the moment.

But she had no thought of future perils, and drove in the gayest of moods to Seafoam Terrace, where she stopped her cab before the door of No. 12. There, however, she met disappointment. Her first inquiry was answered by the news that Mrs. Boyle had died of influenza in the winter, and the house had passed into other hands. The servant could tell her nothing of Minnie; but the new mistress called down from over the baluster, where she had been listening to the conversation, that she believed the little girl had been taken in by the two Misses Witt next door.

Death had stolen from Joan a gratification of which she had dreamed for years. Mrs. Boyle could never now be forced to regret past unkindnesses to the young princess who had emerged like a splendid butterfly from a despised chrysalis; but Minnie was left, and Joan had been genuinely fond of Minnie. She had therefore a double incentive in hurrying to the house next door.

The nice Miss Witt herself answered the ring, and Joan had a few words with her alone. She would be delighted to accept a good position in London; and it was true that Minnie Boyle was there. She had taken compassion on the

child, who was as penniless and friendless as Joan had been when last in Seafoam Terrace; but the elder Miss Witt wished to send the little girl to an orphanage, and the difference of opinion, and Minnie's presence in the house, led to constant discussion. "The only trouble is," said the kindly woman, "that if I leave, sister will send the little creature away."

"She won't, because I shall take Minnie off her hands," retorted Joan, with the promptness of a sudden decision. "Do let me see the poor pet."

Minnie was nine years old, so small that she did not look more than six, and so pathetically pretty that Joan saw at once how she might be fitted into the great plan. She could do even more for the child now than she had expected to do; and because the little one was poor and alone in the world, as she herself had been, Joan's heart grew more than ever warm to her playmate of the past. She made friends with Minnie, who had completely forgotten her, and so bewitched the child with her beauty, her kindness, and her smart clothes that Minnie was enchanted with the prospect of going away with such a grand young lady.

"I used to know some nice fairy stories when I was very, very little," said the child. "This is like one of them."

"I told you those fairy stories," returned Joan. "Now I am going to make them come true."

CHAPTER VI--The Tenants of Roseneath Park

About the first of May, when Cornwall was at its loveliest, everybody within twenty miles of Toragel (a village famed for its beauty and antiquity, as artists and tourists know) was delighted to hear that Lord Trelinnen's place was let at last, and to most desirable tenants. Lord Trelinnen was elderly, and too poor to live at Roseneath Park, therefore Toragel had long ceased to be interested in him; but it was intensely interested in the new people, despite the fact that their advent was the second excitement which had stirred the fortunate village within the last year or two.

The first had been the home-coming of Sir Anthony Pendered, the richest man in the county, who had volunteered for the Boer war, raised a regiment, and, when peace was declared, had come back to Torr Court covered with honours. He was only a knight, and had been given his title because of a valuable new explosive which he had discovered and made practicable. He had grown enormously rich through his various inventions, and, after an adventurous life of some thirty-eight years, had bought a handsome place near his native village, Toragel. At first the county had looked at him askance, but the South African affair had settled all aristocratic doubts in his favour. About a year before the letting of Roseneath Park he had been enthusiastically received by all classes, and was still a hero in everybody's eyes; nevertheless, the first excitement had had time to die down, and the county people and the "best society" of the village united with more or less hidden eagerness to know what poor old Lord Trelinnen's tenants would be like.

The Trelinnen pew in the pretty church of Toragel was next to that where Sir Anthony Pendered was usually (and his maiden sister always) to be seen on Sunday mornings. The first Sunday after the new people's arrival, the church was full; but service began, and still the Trelinnen pew was empty. After all, the tenants of Roseneath Park (whom nobody had seen yet) had come only yesterday. Perhaps they would not appear till next Sunday; but just as the congregation was sadly resigning itself to this conclusion, there was a slight rustle at the door. The first hymn was being sung, therefore eyes were able to turn without too much levity; and it is wonderful how much and how far an eye can see by turning almost imperceptibly, particularly if it be the eye of a woman.

Two ladies and a little girl were shown to the Trelinnen pew. Both ladies were young; the elder could not have been more than twenty-three, the younger looked scarcely nineteen. Both were in half-mourning; both were beautiful. They were, in fact, no other than the Honourable Mrs. Fitzpatrick, and her sisters, Miss Mercy and Mary Milton, these latter being known in other circles as Joan Carthew and little Minnie Boyle.

The child, who appeared to be about six years old, was charmingly dressed, and exemplarily good during the service. As for her elders, they were almost aggravatingly devout, scarcely raising their eyes from their prayer-books, and never glancing about at their neighbours, not even at Sir Anthony Pendered, who looked at the two more than he had ever been known to look at any other women. This was saying a good deal, because he was by no means a misanthrope, although he was forty and had contrived to remain a bachelor. It was rumoured that he wished to marry, if he could find a wife to suit him, though meanwhile he was content enough with the society of his sister, who was far from encouraging any matrimonial aspirations.

When Marian and Joan and Minnie were driven back to Roseneath Park (in

the perfect victoria and by the splendid horses which advertised the solid bank balance they did not possess), the two "elder sisters" talked over their impressions.

Minnie played with a French doll, that somewhat resembled herself in her new white frock, with her quantities of yellow hair. Marian, leaning back on a cushioned sofa, waiting for the luncheon-gong to sound, was prettier and more distinguished-looking than she had ever been; while Joan, as Mercy Milton, would scarcely have been recognised by those who knew her best. Marian's maiden name had really been Milton, and "Mercy" had been selected to fit the picture for which Joan had chosen to sit. Her beautiful, gold-brown hair was parted meekly in the middle and brought down over the ears, finishing with a simple coil in the nape of her white neck. She was dressed as plainly as a young nun, and had the air of qualifying for a saint.

"Well, dear, what did you think of him?" she inquired of Marian.

"Of whom?" asked Mrs. Fitzpatrick, blushing.

"Oh, if you are going to be innocent! Well, then, of the distinguished being whose name and qualifications I showed you in the *Mayfair Budget* a few days after I got back to England and you. The *eligible parti*, in fact, whose residence near Toragel is responsible for our choice of abode."

"Joan! *Don't* put it like that!"

"'Mercy,' if you please, not Joan. And I've found out exactly what I wanted to know. Your reception of my brutal frankness has shown me that you like him. So far, so good."

"I may like him, but that won't help your plan. Oh, Jo--Mercy, I mean, I do feel such a wretch! That man looks so honest and frank and nice, and he could hardly take his eyes off you in church. If he knew what frauds we are!"

"You are not a fraud, and it is you with whom he is concerned, or it will be, as I'll soon show him, if necessary. Your name is Fitzpatrick; you are a widow; we are sisters--in affection. You haven't a fib to tell; you've only got to be charming."

"But it's you he admires. I told you it would be so. If one of us is to be Lady----"

"Sh!" said Joan; and the gong boomed musically for lunch.

Had it not been for the existence of innocent little Minnie, the county might not have accepted the lovely sisters as readily as it did. Joan had thought of that, as she thought of most things; and Minnie, the *protégée* of charity, was distinctly an asset. "A very good prop," as Joan mentally called her, in theatrical slang which she had learned, perhaps, from her long-vanished mother.

The presence of Minnie in the feminine household gave a kind of pathetic, domestic grace, which appealed even to tradespeople; and tradespeople were extremely important in Joan's calculations.

She had obtained credentials, upon starting on her new career, in a charac-

teristic way. Miss Jenny Mordaunt wrote to Lady John Bevan, asking for a letter of introduction for a great friend of hers, the Honourable Mrs. Fitzpatrick, to the solicitors who had charge of Lord Trelinnen's affairs, as Mrs. Fitzpatrick wanted to take Roseneath Park. Jenny Mordaunt's late chaperon gladly managed this. Mrs. Fitzpatrick called upon her, and Lady John was charmed. She had known the "Dishonourable Dick" slightly, years ago, had heard that he had married an heiress, and marvelled now that he had been tolerated by so sweet a creature as this. Lady John offered one or two letters of introduction to old friends in Cornwall, and they were gratefully accepted. As the friends were not intimate, and as Lady John detested the country, except when hunting or shooting was in question, there was little danger that she would inopportune appear on the scene and recognise the saintly Mercy Milton as the late Miss Mordaunt.

Everybody called on the fair, lilylike young widow and her very modest, retiring, unmarried sister--everybody, that is, with the exception of Miss Pendered, who pleaded, when her brother urged, that she was too much of an invalid to call on new people. Soon, however, he boldly went by himself, excusing his sister with some tale of rheumatism which she would have indignantly resented. Mrs. Fitzpatrick and Mercy Milton were surrounded with other visitors when Sir Anthony Pendered was announced, and he was just in time to hear a glowing account of the orphaned sisters' "dear old California home," which Joan had learned by heart, partly from Marian's reminiscences, partly from a book.

[image]

"Mrs. Fitzpatrick and Mercy Milton were surrounded by other visitors when Sir Anthony Pendered was announced."

"When father and mother died, little Minnie and I were the loneliest creatures you can imagine," the gentle Mercy was saying. "Dear Marian had just lost her husband, and so she wrote for us to join her. It is so nice having a home in the country again. We both felt we couldn't be happy without one, and we chose Cornwall because we thought it the loveliest county in England. We are very glad we did, now, for everybody has been so kind."

She might have added "and the trades-people so trusting"; but on that subject she was silent, though she intended that they should go on trusting indefinitely. Indeed, thus far the scheme worked almost too easily to be interesting.

Sir Anthony Pendered outstayed the other visitors, and he stopped unconscionably long for a first call; but that was the fault of his hostesses, who made themselves so charming that the man lost count of time--and perhaps lost his head

a little, also. At first it seemed that Marian's impression was right, and that, despite Mercy's retiring ways, it was the young girl who attracted him. This made Marian secretly sad; for when she had seen Sir Anthony looking up from his prayer-book in the adjoining pew, she had said in her heart, with a sigh: "How good he would be to a woman! How he would pet her and take care of her! To be his wife would be very different from---" but she had guiltily broken short that sentence in the midst.

Persuaded and fired by Joan, she had entered into this adventure. She had even laughed when Joan selected the neighbourhood of Toragel because a Society paper announced the advent of a particularly desirable bachelor. "You will be the prettiest and nicest woman in the county, of course; therefore, he will fall in love with you and propose. He will marry you; you will live happy ever after; and you will be able to pay all the debts that we shall have run up in the process of securing him," the girl had remarked. But now, when the "desirable bachelor" had become a living entity, and she felt her heart yearning towards him, Marian's conscience grew sore. Still, though she told herself that she could not carry out the plan and try to win Sir Anthony Pendered, it was a blow to see him prefer Joan.

The symptoms of his admiration were equally displeasing to the girl. She was deliberately effacing herself for this episode; while it lasted, she was to be merely the "power behind the throne." Knowing that she was more strikingly beautiful and brilliant than Marian Fitzpatrick, she had studied how to reduce her fascinations, that Marian might outshine her. Evidently she had not entirely succeeded; but during that first call of Sir Anthony's, she quickly, surreptitiously changed a diamond-ring from her right hand to the "engaged" finger of her left, flourished the newly adorned member under his eyes, and spoke, with a conscious simper, of "going back some day to California to live." Sir Anthony did not misunderstand, and as he had not yet tumbled over the brink of that precipice whence a man falls into love, he readjusted his inclinations. After all, Mrs. Fitzpatrick was as pretty, he thought, and certainly more sympathetic. He was glad that Minnie was her sister, and not her child. Though he had always said he would not care to marry a widow, this case was different from any that he had imagined, for Mrs. Fitzpatrick had only been married a year or two when her husband died, and she had soon awakened from her girlish fancy for the man--so Miss Milton had guilelessly confided to him.

Thanks to this, and much further "guilelessness" of the same kind on the part of the meek maiden, Sir Anthony Pendered discovered, before the sisters had been for many weeks tenants of Roseneath Park, that he was deeply in love with Marian Fitzpatrick. Accordingly, he proposed one June afternoon, amid the ruins of a storied castle overhanging the sea. Joan had got up a picnic to this place expressly to give him the opportunity which she felt triumphantly sure he was

seeking, and she was naturally annoyed with Marian when she discovered that the young widow had asked for "time to think it over."

"You little idiot! Why didn't you fall into his arms and say 'Yes--yes--yes'?" the girl demanded, in Marian's bedroom, when they had come home towards evening.

"Because I love him, and because I'm a fraud!" exclaimed Marian. "Oh! I know what you must think of me. I haven't played straight with you, either. You've done everything for me. I was to make this match; and the rent of this place, and our horses and carriages, the payment of all the tradespeople on whom we've been practically living, depend on my catching the splendid 'fish' you've landed for me. You've lent me a lot of money; and what you had left when we came here, you've been spending----"

"I've spread it like very thin butter on very thick bread, to make the hundreds look like thousands. To carry off a big *coup* like this, one must have *some* ready money," broke in Joan, with a queer little smile at her own cleverness, and the thought of where it would land her if Marian's "conscientious scruples" refused to be put to sleep. "We *shall* be in rather a scrape if you won't marry Sir Anthony--and you're made for each other, too. But never mind, we shall get out of it somehow. At worst, we can disappear."

"And leave everything unpaid, and let him and everybody know we are adventuresses!" exclaimed Marian, breaking into tears.

"Don't cry, dear; don't worry; and don't decide anything," said Joan. "I have an idea."

She induced Marian to go to bed and nurse the violent headache which the battle between heart and conscience had brought on. When it was certain that Mrs. Fitzpatrick would not appear again that evening, she sent a little note by hand to Sir Anthony, as fortunately Torr Count was the next estate to Roseneath Park. "Do come over at once. It is very important that I should see you," wrote the decorous Mercy.

Sir Anthony Pendered was in the midst of dinner when the communication arrived, and to his sister's disgust he begged her to excuse him, as it was necessary to go out immediately on business.

"That adventuress has sent for you!" Ellen Pendered fiercely exclaimed. "She has got you completely in her net. I don't believe those three are sisters. They don't look in the least alike, and it is all very well to say an ignorant nurse spoiled the child's accent. I have heard her talk more like a Cockney than a Californian. I tell you there is something wrong, very wrong, about them all."

"I advise you not to tell any one else, then," answered Anthony Pendered furiously--"that is, unless you wish to break off for ever with me. This afternoon I asked the 'adventuress,' as you dare to call her, to marry me, and she refused. I

had to plead before she would even promise to think it over." With this he left his sister also to "think it over," and decide that, between two evils, it might be wise to choose the less.

Marian's lover could not guess why Marian's younger sister had sent for him, and his anxiety increased when he saw the gravity of the girl's face.

"Is Mar--is Mrs. Fitzpatrick ill?" he stammered.

"A little, because she is unhappy; but you can make her well again--if you choose," replied Joan inscrutably.

"Of course I choose!" he almost indignantly protested.

"Wait," said she, "and listen to what I have to say. Poor Marian is the victim of her own goodness and sweet nature; and because she swore to me that she would never tell the story of our past, she feels it would be wrong to marry you. I cannot let her suffer for Minnie and me, so I am now going to tell you, myself. But on this condition--if you do decide that you want her for your wife in spite of all, you will never once mention the subject to Marian. I will inform her that you know the truth and that she is not to speak of it to you. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes; but you needn't tell me the story unless you like. I'm sure *she* is not to blame for anything," replied the man, who was now thoroughly in love with Marian, even to the point of wondering what he had ever seen in Mercy.

"Certainly it is not she; but as she thinks it is, it amounts to the same thing. The facts are these: Dear, good Marian took pity on Minnie and me in a London boarding-house, where we chanced to meet after her widowhood. She had decided to come here to live, because she longed for the country, but had not meant to take as grand a house as this, as she had just found out that her dead husband had spent most of her fortune. I implored her to bring Minnie and me to her new home, and give me a good chance of getting into society by introducing us as her sisters. She was rather a 'swell'--at least, she had married an 'Honourable,' and we were nobodies. The poor darling finally consented to handicap herself with us. I had a little money, too, which had--er--come to me through a lucky investment, and I was so anxious to live at Roseneath Park that I made Marian (who is most unbusiness-like) believe that together we would have enough to take the place. I am supposed to be practical, and so the management of everything has been left to me. I have paid scarcely anything, except the servants' wages, so you see what I have brought my poor Marian down to. The only atonement I can make is to try and save her happiness by confessing my wrongdoing to you and begging that you will not visit it on her."

"I certainly will not do that," said Sir Anthony Pendered quickly. "As you say, her one fault has been a kindness of heart almost amounting to weakness, which, in my eyes, makes her more lovable than ever. As for the loss of her money, that matters nothing to me. I have more than I want, and----"

"You'll pay everything, without betraying me to Marian? Oh! I don't deserve it; but *do* say you will do that, and I will relieve you of my presence near your *fiancée* as soon as possible, as a reward. I know that, after what I have told you, it would be an embarrassment to you to see me with Marian, because as you are *very* chivalrous, you could not let people know I was not really her sister. I will disappear, and every one can think I have been suddenly called out to my Californian lover to be married."

"Doesn't he exist?" questioned Sir Anthony, looking at her "engaged" finger and thinking of the matrimonial schemes she had just confessed.

"Not in California. But as I haven't been a success here, I may decide to be true to the person who gave me this ring." (She had bought it herself.) "Now that I've promised to go out of Marian's life for ever, you'll guard her happiness by seeing that everything is straightened here--financially?"

"I shall be only too delighted, if you will tell me how to manage it without my name appearing in the matter."

"We--ll, if you'd trust the money to me, I'd use it honestly to pay our debts, and give you all the receipts."

"So it shall be."

"You're a--a brick, Sir Anthony. The only difficulty left then is about poor little Minnie, of whom Marian is really very fond. People might gossip if Marian let her youngest sister go back to California with me; for as we are supposed to be so nearly related, surely it would be better to save a scandal and let--well, let sleeping sisters lie?"

"If Marian is truly fond of Minnie, there will be plenty of room for the child at Torr Court, and she will be welcome to stay there, as far as I am concerned. I must say, Miss--er--Milton, that I think the child will be better off under our guardianship than in the care of her real sister."

"You *are* good, and I quite agree with you," responded Joan meekly, far from resenting his look of stern reproach. "When you've trusted me with that money to pay things, and I hand you the receipts, I'll hand you also a written undertaking never to trouble you or--Lady Pendered. You would like me to do that, wouldn't you?"

"I--er--perhaps something of the kind might be advisable," murmured Sir Anthony.

When he had gone, the girl chuckled and clapped her hands. Then she ran to a looking-glass. "You're not exactly stupid, my dear," she apostrophised her saintly reflection. "You've provided splendidly for Marian and you've saved her sensitive conscience. *Her* slate is clean. As for Minnie, she will be all right until the time comes, if it ever does, that you can do better for her. As for yourself--well, you can leave Marian a couple of hundred for pocket-money, and still get

out of this with something on which to start again. You've finished with Mercy Milton, thank goodness! and--it *will* be a relief to do your hair another way."

Two days later, Joan Carthew had turned her back upon Toragel, and Mrs. Fitzpatrick's engagement to Sir Anthony Pendered was announced.

CHAPTER VII--The Woman Who Knew

Joan went straight from Cornwall to London and the Bloomsbury boarding-house in which some of her curiously earned money was invested. All was to begin over again now; but to the girl this idea brought inspiration rather than discouragement, for the world was still her oyster, if she could open it, and experience had already taught her some dexterity in the use of the knife. At this house in Woburn Place she had the right to live without paying, while she "looked round," and Miss Witt, who owed her present position to Joan, was only too delighted to welcome her benefactress.

The place was doing well, and the corner of difficulty had been turned; this was the news the manager-housekeeper had to give Joan. Every room but one was full, and so far the boarders seemed to be "good pay," with perhaps a single exception.

"There's only the little top floor back that's empty," cheerfully went on Miss Witt. "Of course, I will take that and give you mine."

"You'll do nothing of the sort, my dear woman," said Joan. "I like running up and down stairs. It does me good. Besides, I'd rather be at the back. There's a tree, or something that once tried hard to be a tree, to look at, as I know well, for the room used to be mine; so there's no use talking any more about that matter--it's settled. You stay where you are, and I will rise, like cream, to the top. Now tell me about this doubtful person you are afraid won't pay. Is it a man or a woman?"

"A woman," replied Miss Witt, "and one of the strangest beings I ever saw. It is a great comfort to me that you are here, miss, for you can decide what is to be done about her. She hasn't paid her board for a fortnight, but she keeps pleading

that as soon as she is well, and can go out, she will get remittances which have been delayed."

"Oh, she is ill, then?"

"So she says. But I'm not sure, miss, it isn't just an excuse to work upon my compassion, for why should she have to go out for remittances? She stops in her room, lying upon a sofa, and makes a deal of bother with her meals being carried up so many pairs of stairs, though it's hardly worth while her having them at all, she eats so little. Yet she doesn't look a bit different from what she did when she was supposed to be well and going about as much like anybody else as one of her sort could ever do."

"What do you mean?" asked Joan, whose curiosity was fired.

"Only that she is, and was, more a ghost than a human being, with her great, hollow, black eyes, like burning coals, set deep under her thick eyebrows and overhanging forehead; with her thin cheeks--why, miss, they almost meet in the middle--her yellow-white skin, her tall, gliding figure and stealthy way of walking, so that you never hear a sound till she's at your back."

"Queer kind of boarder," commented Joan.

"That she is, miss; and when she applied for a room, I would have said we were full up, but in those days we had several of our best rooms empty, and, strange as she was, her clothes were so good, and the luggage on the four-wheeler waiting outside was so promising, as you might say, that it did seem a pity to send away two guineas a week because Providence had given it a scarecrow face. So I showed her the best back room on the top floor-----"

"Next to mine," cut in Joan.

"If you will have it so, miss; and there she's been for the last six weeks, not having paid a penny since the end of the first month."

"What is the ghost's name and age?" the girl went on with her catechism.

"Her name, if one was to take her word, which I'm far from being certain of, is Mrs. Gone; and as for her age, miss, she might be almost anywhere between fifty and a hundred."

"What a clever old lady!" laughed the girl. "Well, we can't turn the poor wretch away while she's ill, if she is ill, can we? I know too well what it is to be alone in the world and down on your luck, to be hard on anybody else, especially a woman. We must give Mrs. Gone the benefit of the doubt for a little while. But your description has quite interested me; I should like to see this ghost who doesn't walk."

"The house is the same as yours, miss," said Miss Witt. "You have the right to go into her room at any time, more particularly as she hasn't paid for it."

"Perhaps I'll carry up her dinner this evening, by way of an excuse," returned Joan--"if you think she could bear the shock of seeing a strange face."

Upon this, Miss Witt, who adored the girl, protested that, in her opinion, the sight of such a face could only be a pleasure to any person and in any circumstances. Joan laughed at the compliment, but she did not forget her intention. Mrs. Gone's meals were usually taken up a few minutes before the gong summoned the guests to the dining-room, because it was easier to spare a servant then than later, and it was just after the dressing-bell had rung that the girl knocked at the "ghost's" door.

Joan was surprised to find her heart quickening its beats as she waited for a bidding to "Come in!" One would think that a sight of this old woman who would not pay her board was an exciting event! She smiled at herself, but the smile faded as she threw open the door in answer to a faint murmur on the other side. Miss Witt's sketch of Mrs. Gone had not been an exaggeration.

There she lay on a sofa by the window, her face gleaming white in the twilight; and it was a wonderful face. A shiver went creeping up and down Joan's spine, as a flame leaped out from the shadowy hollows of two sunken eyes to hers.

"This woman has been some one in particular--some one extraordinary," the girl thought quickly; and as politely as if she had addressed a duchess, she explained her intrusion. "The servants were busy, and I offered to carry up your dinner," Joan said. "I arrived only to-day; and as Miss Witt looks upon me as a sort of proprietor, she told me how ill you have been. I hope you are better."

The old woman with the strange face looked steadily at the beautiful girl in the pretty, simple, evening frock which was to grace the boarding-house dinner. "Did Miss Witt tell you nothing else?" she asked, in a voice which would have made the fortune of a tragic actress in the death scene of some aged queen.

"She told me that she was afraid you were in trouble," promptly answered Joan, who had her own way of dressing the truth. By this time the girl had entered the room, set the tray on a table near the sofa, and taking a rose from her bodice, laid it on the pile of plates. This she did on the impulse of the moment, not with a preconceived idea of effect, and she was rewarded by a slight softening of the tense muscles round the once handsome mouth.

"I hope you like roses?" she asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Gone answered brusquely. "Why do you give it to me?"

"Because I'm sorry you are ill, and perhaps lonely," said Joan, able for once to account for an action without a single mental reserve. "I have had a good deal of worry in my life, and can sympathise with others, as I told Miss Witt when she spoke of you. One reason why I came was to say that you needn't distress yourself about your indebtedness to this house. Try to get well, and pay at your convenience. You shall not be pressed."

Joan had not meant to say all this when she arranged to have a sight of Mrs. Gone. She had merely wished to satisfy her curiosity; but now she felt impelled to

utter these words of encouragement--why, she did not know, for she had not conceived any sudden fancy for the sinister old woman. On the contrary, the white face, with its burning eyes and secretive mouth, inspired her with something like fear. A woman with such a face could not have many sweet, redeeming graces of character or heart. There was, to supersensitive nerves, an atmosphere of evil as well as mystery about her; but though Joan felt this, it gave a keener edge to her interest.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Gone. "You are kind, as well as pretty. I do not like young people usually, but I might learn to like you. I hope you will come again."

The words were a dismissal and a compliment. Joan accepted them as both. She promised to repeat her visit, and after lighting the shaded lamp on the table, left Mrs. Gone to eat her dinner.

The girl would have given much to lift the veil of mystery wrapped about this woman's past and personality. She even boasted to herself that she would find some way, sooner or later, at least to peep under its edge; but day after day passed, and though she went often to Mrs. Gone's room, and was always thanked for her kind attentions, she seemed no nearer to attaining her object than at first. Beyond occupying a room which she did not pay for, Mrs. Gone was not an expensive guest. She ate almost nothing; and when Joan had been in Woburn Place for a week, the white face with its burning eyes had become so drawn with suffering that in real compassion the girl offered to call a doctor at her own expense. But Mrs. Gone would not consent. "I hate doctors," she said. "No one could tell me more about myself than I know."

The girl's own affairs were absorbing enough, for she saw no new opening yet for her ambition; still, she found time to think a great deal about Mrs. Gone. "Am I a soft-hearted idiot, allowing myself to be imposed upon by a professional 'sponge'?" she wondered; "or is there something in my odd feeling that I shall be rewarded for all I do for this extraordinary woman?"

Such questions were passing through her mind one night when she had gone to bed late, after being out at the theatre. She had been in Woburn Place eight days, and was growing impatient, for none of the boarders were of the kind to be used as "stepping-stones," and none of the Society and financial papers, which she studied, afforded any hopeful suggestion for another phase of her career. To be sure, the young man with whom she had consented to go to the theatre was employed as a reporter for a great London daily, and she had been "nice" to him, with the vague idea that she might somehow be able to profit by his infatuation; but at present she did not see her way, and it appeared that she was wasting sweetness on the desert air.

"I suppose," Joan said to herself, turning over her hot pillow, "that if I were an ordinary girl, I might be contented to go on as I am. I can live here for nothing,

and get enough interest on the money I've put into this concern to buy clothes and pay my way about, with strict economy. All the men in the house are in love with me; and if they were more interesting, that might be amusing. But I'm not born to be contented with small people or things. I don't want clothes. I want creations. I don't want the admiration of young men from the City. I want to be appreciated by princes. I believe I must have been a princess in another state of existence, for I always feel that the best of everything is hardly good enough for me."

As she thought this, half laughing, there came a sound from the next room—that room which might have been the grave of the strange woman who occupied it, so dead was the silence which reigned there day and night. Never before had Joan heard the least noise on the other side of the dividing wall, but now she was startled by a crash as of breaking glass, followed by the dull, soft thud which could only have been made by the fall of a human body. Joan sat up, her heart thumping, and it gave a frightened bound as a groan came brokenly to her ears.

She waited no longer, but slipped her bare feet into a pair of satin *mules*, flung on her dressing-gown, and in another moment was out of her room and in the dark passage, fumbling for the handle of the other door.

Mrs. Gone kept her door unlocked in the daytime, perhaps to save herself the trouble of rising to admit servants, or her only visitor, Joan Carthew; but the girl feared that it might not be so at night, and that before she could penetrate the mystery of the fall and the groan, the whole house would have to be disturbed. She was relieved, therefore, to find that the door yielded to her touch. Pushing it open, she listened for an instant, but only the dead silence throbbed in her ears.

As she got into her dressing-gown, with characteristic presence of mind Joan had caught up a box of matches and put it into her pocket. The room was as dark as the passage outside, and the girl struck a match before crossing the threshold. The little flame leaped and brightened. Something on the floor glimmered white in the darkness, and Joan did not need to bend down to know what it was.

The gas was close to the door, and she lighted it with the dying match, which burnt her fingers. Then she saw clearly what had happened. In tottering uncertainty across the floor, Mrs. Gone had knocked over a small table holding a china candlestick, a water-bottle, and a goblet. She had fallen, and after uttering that one groan which had crept to Joan's ears, she had lost consciousness.

The girl's quick eyes sought for an explanation of the catastrophe. The long, white figure lay at some distance from the bed, and near the mantel. On the mantel stood a curiously shaped, dark green bottle, which Joan had once been requested to give to Mrs. Gone. She had seen a few drops of some colourless liquid poured into a wineglass of water; and when it had been swallowed, the ghastly pallor of

the face had changed to a more natural tint. Mrs. Gone had then said that she took the medicine when very ill. If she used it oftener, its effect would disappear, and she would have nothing left to turn to at the worst.

"It was that bottle she was trying to find in the dark," Joan guessed. "She must have been too ill to try and light the gas. Now, how much was it that I saw her pour out? It might have been ten drops--no more."

So thinking, the girl filled a glass on the wash-handstand a third full of water, measured ten drops of the medicine with a steady hand, and raising Mrs. Gone's head, put the tumbler to her lips. The strong teeth seemed clenched, but some of the liquid must have passed their barrier, for the dark eyes opened wide and looked up into Joan's face.

"Too late----" the woman panted, with a gurgling in the throat which choked her words. "Dying--now. Wish that--you--you have been kind--only one in the world. My secret--you might have--Lord Northmuir would have given---"

The voice trailed away into silence. The gurgle died into a rattle; the woman's breast heaved and was still. Her eyes had not closed, but though they stared into Joan's, the spark of life behind their windows had gone out. Mrs. Gone was dead, and had taken her secret with her into the unknown.

Joan had never seen death before, but there was no mistaking it. Her first impulse was to run downstairs, call Miss Witt and a young doctor who had his office and bedroom on the dining-room floor. Nevertheless, when she had laid the heavy head gently down and sprung to her feet, she remained standing.

For some minutes she stood motionless, almost rigid, her lips pressed together, her eyes hard and bright. Then she struck one hand lightly upon the other, exclaiming half aloud: "I'll do it!"

It seemed certain by this time that no one had heard the crash of glass and the fall which had alarmed her, for the house was still. Nevertheless, Joan tiptoed to the door and bolted it. When she had done this, she opened all the drawers of the dressing-table and searched them carefully for papers. Discovering none, she left everything exactly as she had found it. Next she examined the pockets of the three or four dresses hanging in the wardrobe, but they were limp and empty. There were still left the leather portmanteau and handbag which had appealed to Miss Witt's respectful admiration. Both were locked, but Joan's instinct led her to look under the pillows on the bed, and there lay a key-ring. She was able to open portmanteau and bag, but not a paper of any kind was to be seen, and the girl recalled a remark of Miss Witt's, that never since Mrs. Gone had become a boarder in Woburn Place had she been known to receive or send a letter.

Having assured herself that no information was to be gained among the dead woman's possessions, Joan unlocked the door and went softly downstairs to rouse Miss Witt. She justified what she had done by reason of Mrs. Gone's last

words, for she believed that the dead woman would have made her a present of the secret if she could.

CHAPTER VIII--Lord Northmuir's Young Relative

Awakened and informed of what had happened, the housekeeper called the doctor, who looked at the body and certified that death had resulted from failure of the heart, which must have been long diseased. Joan paid for a good oak coffin and a decent funeral. She bought a grave at Kensal Green and ordered a neat stone to be erected. If she had previously earned Mrs. Gone's gratitude, she felt that she had now merited any reward which might accrue in future, and the curious, erasible tablet that did duty as her conscience was wiped clear.

The morning after Mrs. Gone's funeral, the girl put on her favourite frock of grey cloth, with a hat to match, which had been bought at one of the most fashionable shops in Monte Carlo. This costume, with grey gloves, grey shoes, and a grey chiffon parasol, ivory-handled, gave Joan an air of quiet smartness, a combination particularly appropriate for the adventure which she had planned. She hired a decorous brougham and said to the coachman: "Drive to Northmuir House, Belgrave Square."

It was but ten o'clock, and, as Joan had gleaned some information concerning the habits of the occupant, she was confident that he would be at home. Mrs. Gone had not been dead two hours when the girl began searching through her own scrapbook, compiled of cuttings taken from Society papers. Whenever she came across the description of any important member of the aristocracy--his or her home life, manners, fancies, and ways--she cut it out and pasted it into this book, in case it should become valuable for reference. The moment that the dying woman uttered the name of Northmuir, Joan's memory jumped to a paragraph (one of the first that had gone into the scrapbook), and as soon as she could shut herself up in the little back room, she had consulted her authority.

The Earl of Northmuir was, according to the paper from which the cutting had been clipped, still the handsomest man in England, though now long past

middle age. Once he had been among the most popular also, but for some years he had lived more or less in retirement, owing to illness and family bereavements, seldom leaving his fine old town house in Belgrave Square.

"He'll be in London, and he won't be the sort of man to go out before noon," Joan said to herself.

Her heart was beating more quickly than usual, but her face was calm and untroubled, as she stood on the great porch at Northmuir House, asking a footman in sober livery if Lord Northmuir were at home.

The girl in the grey dress and grey hat, with large, soft ostrich feathers, might have been a young princess. Whatever she was, she merited civility, and the servant, who could not wholly conceal surprise, politely invited her to enter, while he inquired if his Lordship could receive a visitor. "What name shall I say?" he asked.

"Give him this, please," said Joan, handing the footman an envelope, addressed to "The Earl of Northmuir." Inside this envelope was a sheet of paper, blank, save for the words, "A messenger from Mrs. Gone, who is dead"; and the death notice was enclosed.

With this envelope the man went away, leaving her to wait in a large and splendid drawing-room, where stiffness of arrangement betrayed the absence of a woman's taste.

Joan looked about appreciatively, yet critically. Then, when she had gained an impressionist picture of the room, she glanced at the jewelled watch on her wrist, a present from Lady John Bevan after the sale of the *Titania*.

What if Lord Northmuir had never known the dead woman under the name of Gone? What if--there were many things which might go wrong, and Joan had put her whole stake on a single chance. If she had been mistaken--but as her mind played among surmises, the footman returned.

"His Lordship will see you in his study, if you will kindly come this way," the servant announced.

Joan rose with quiet dignity and followed the man along a pillared hall to a closed door. "The lady, my lord," murmured the footman, in opening it. Joan was left alone with a singularly handsome old man, who sat in a huge cushioned chair by the fireplace. It was summer still, but a fire of ship-logs sparkled with changing rainbow lights on the stone hearth. In a thin hand, Lord Northmuir held an exquisitely bound book. He must have been more than sixty, but his features were of the cameo--fine, classic cut, of which the beauty, like that of old marble, never dies, and it was easy to see why he had once borne a reputation as the handsomest man in England. It was easy to see also, by his eyes as they catalogued each item of Joan's beauty, that he had been a gallant man, not blind to the charms of women. Nevertheless, his voice was cold as he spoke to the

unexpected visitor.

"I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name, or why you have honoured me by calling," he said. "Forgive my not rising. I am rather an invalid. Pray sit down. There is something I can do for you?"

"Several things, Lord Northmuir," returned the girl, taking the chair his gesture had indicated.

"You will tell me what they are?"

"I am anxious to tell you. In the first place, I wish to be a relation of yours, and not a poor relation. I wish to have a thousand pounds a year, either permanently or until my marriage, should I become the wife of a rich man through your introduction."

Lord Northmuir stared at the girl, and if there were not genuine astonishment in his eyes, he was a clever actor. "You are a handsome young woman," he said slowly, when she had finished, "but I begin to be afraid that your mind is unfortunately--er--affected."

"There is a weight upon it," Joan replied.--"the weight of your secret. It's so heavy that unless you are very kind, I shall be tempted to throw the burden off by laying it upon others."

Now the blood hummed in her ears. If she had built a house of cards, this was the moment when it would topple, and bury her ambition in its ignominious downfall. But Lord Northmuir's slow speech had quickened her hope, for she said to herself that it was not spontaneous; and gazing keenly into his face, she saw the blood stain his forehead. She had staked on the right chance, yet the risk was not past. Her game was the game of bluff, but its success depended upon the man with whom she had to deal.

"I do not understand what you are talking about," he said.

"I dare say I haven't made my meaning clear," answered Joan, half rising. "Perhaps I'd better explain to my solicitor, and get him to write a letter----"

"You are nothing more nor less than a common blackmailer," Lord Northmuir exclaimed, bringing down his white hand on the arm of his chair.

"I may be nothing less, but I am a good deal more than a common one," retorted Joan, surer of her ground. "I will prove that, if you force me to do it."

"Who are you?" he broke out abruptly.

"I am a Woman Who Knows," she replied. "There was another Woman Who Knew. She called herself Gone. She is dead, and I have come. I have come to stay."

"Don't you understand that I can hand you over to the police?" demanded Lord Northmuir, with difficulty controlling his voice so that it could not be heard by possible listeners outside the door.

"Yes; and I understand that I can hand your secret over to the police. They would know how to use it."

He flushed again, and Joan saw that her daring shot had told. For the instant he had no answer ready, and she seized the opportunity to speak once more. "You can do better for yourself than hand me over to the police. There need be no trouble, if you will realise that I am not a common person, and not to be treated as such."

"Again I ask: Who are you?" he cried.

Joan risked another shot in the dark. "Can't you make a guess?" she asked, with a malicious suggestion of hidden meaning in her tone.

An expression of horror and surprise passed over Lord Northmuir's handsome face, devastating it as a marching tornado devastates a landscape. It was evident that he had "made a guess," and been thunderstruck by its answer. Joan's curiosity was so strongly roused that it touched physical pain. Almost, she would have been ready to give one of her pretty fingers to know the secret.

"Do you still wish to ask questions?" she inquired.

"Heaven help me, no! What is it that you want?"

"I have told you already. If I insisted on all I have a right to claim, you would not be where you are."

She watched him. He grew deathly and bowed his white head. Joan felt sorry for the man now that he was at her mercy; but her imagination played with the secret, as a child plays with a prism in the sunshine. Its flashing colours allured her. "Oh! if I only *knew* something," she thought, "something which would hold in law, and could go through the courts, where might I not stand? I might reach one of the highest places a woman can fill. But it's no use; I must take what I can get, and be thankful; and, anyway, I can't help pitying him a little, though I'm sure he doesn't deserve it. He's old and tired, and I won't make him suffer more than is necessary for the game."

Joan again named her terms, this time with much ornamental detail. She was to be a newly discovered orphan cousin. Her name was to be, as it had been in Cornwall, Mercy Milton. She was to be invited to visit, for an indefinite length of time, at Northmuir House. Her noble relative was to exert himself to the extent of giving entertainments to introduce her to his most influential and highly placed friends. He was also to make her an allowance of a thousand pounds a year.

"Don't think, if you gamble away as--as the other did, that I will go beyond this bargain, for I will not!" cried Lord Northmuir, with a testy desire to assert himself and show that he was not wholly to be cowed.

"I don't gamble, except with Fate," said Joan.

This exclamation of his explained one or two things which had been dark. She guessed now why Mrs. Gone, evidently used to luxuries, had been reduced to living on the charity of a boarding-house keeper, and why it had been necessary to wait until she should be well enough to go out before she could obtain

"remittances."

Having concluded her arrangement with Lord Northmuir, and settled to become his relative and guest, Joan went back in her brougham to Woburn Place. She told Miss Witt that she had been called away, packed her things, left such as she would not want in Belgrave Square in boxes at the boarding-house, delighted the housekeeper with many gifts, and the following morning drove off with a pile of luggage on a cab. Turning the corner of Woburn Place into the next street, she also turned a corner in her career, and for the third time ceased to be Joan Carthew.

She had chosen to take up her lately laid down part of Mercy Milton for two reasons. One was, that in this character as she had played it in Cornwall, with meekly parted hair, soft, downcast eyes, simple manners and simple frocks, she was not likely to be recognised by any one who had known the dashing and magnificent Miss Jenny Mordaunt; while if she should come across Cornish acquaintances, there was nothing in her new position which need invalidate the story of Lady Pendered's gentle sister.

If Lord Northmuir had looked forward with dread to the intrusion of the adventuress whom he was forced to receive, he soon found that, beyond the galling knowledge of his bondage, he had nothing disagreeable to fear. The young cousin did not attempt to interfere with his habits after he had provided her with acquaintances, who increased after the manner of a "snowball" stamp competition. The two usually lunched and dined together, and--at first--that was all. But Miss Mercy Milton made herself charming at table, never referred by word or look to the loathed secret, and was so tactful that, to his extreme surprise, almost horror, the man found himself looking forward to the hours of meeting. Joan was not slow to see this; indeed, she had been working up to it. When the right time came, she volunteered to help Lord Northmuir with his letters (he had no secretary) and to read aloud. At the end of six months she had become indispensable, and he would have wondered how existence had been possible without his treasure had he dwelt upon the dangerous subject at all. If, however, the blackmailer's instalment in the household had turned out an agreeable disappointment to the blackmailed, it was a disappointment of another kind to the author of the plot. Joan Carthew did not find life in Belgrave Square half as amusing as she had pictured it, and though she was surrounded by luxury which might be hers as long as Lord Northmuir lived, each day she grew more restless and discontented.

She had found society on the Riviera delightful, but the butterfly crowd which fluttered between Nice and Monte Carlo had little resemblance to that with which she came in contact as Lord Northmuir's cousin. Jenny Mordaunt could do much as she pleased--at worst she was put down as a "mad American, my dear"; but Mercy Milton had the family dignity to live up to. Lord Northmuir's adopted

relative could not afford to be "cut" by the primmest dowager; and being an ideal, conventional English girl in the best society did not suit Joan's roaming fancies.

It was supposed that she would be Lord Northmuir's heiress; consequently mothers of eligible young men were charming to her, which would have been convenient if Joan had happened to want one of their sons. But not one of the men who sent her flowers and begged for "extras" at dances would she have married if he had been the last existing specimen of his sex. This was annoying, for in planning her campaign, Joan had resolved to marry well and settle satisfactorily for life. Now, however, she found that it was simpler to decide upon a mercenary marriage in the abstract than when it became a personal question.

At the close of a year with Lord Northmuir she had saved seven hundred pounds, and at last, after a sleepless night, she made up her mind to take a step which was, in a way, a confession of failure.

She went to Lord Northmuir's study as usual in the morning, but this time it was not to act as reader or amanuensis.

"It's a year to-day since I came," she said abruptly, with a purposeful look on her face which the man felt was ominous.

"Yes," he answered. "A strange year, but not an unhappy one. What I regarded as a curse has turned out a blessing. I should miss the albatross now if it were to be taken off my neck."

"I'm sorry for that," said Joan, "for the albatross has revived and intends to fly away."

"What! You will marry?"

"No. I'm tired of being conventional. I've decided to relieve you of my presence here; and you can forget me, except when, each quarter, you sign a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds."

Lord Northmuir's handsome face grew almost as white as when she had first announced her claim upon him. "I don't want to forget you. I can't forget you!" he stammered. "If I could, I would publish the whole truth; but that is impossible, for the honour of the name. You have made me fond of you--made me depend upon you. Why did you do that, if you meant to leave me alone?"

"I didn't mean it at first," replied Joan frankly. "I thought I should be 'in clover' here, and so I have been; but too much clover upsets the digestion. I must go, Lord Northmuir. I can't stand it any longer. I'm pining for adventures."

"Have you fallen in love?"

"No. I wish I had. I've been trying in vain."

"A year ago I would not have believed it possible that I should make you such an offer, but you have wrought a miracle. You came to blackmail, you remained to bless. Stay with me, my girl, till I die, and not only shall you be remembered in my will, but I will increase your allowance from one thousand to two thousand

a year. I can afford to do this, since you have become the one luxury I can't live without."

"I was just beginning to say that, if you would let me go without a fuss, I would take five hundred instead of a thousand a year."

"But now I have shown you my heart, you see that offer does not appeal to me."

Joan broke out laughing; this upsetting of the whole situation was so humorous. A sudden reckless impulse seized her. She could not resist it.

"Lord Northmuir, you will change your mind when I have told you something," she said. "I have played a trick on you. I have no connection with your family, and know no more about your secret than I know what will be in to-morrow's papers. Mrs. Gone, in dying, mentioned a secret and your name. I put two and two together, and they matched so well that I've lived on you for a year, bought lots of dresses, made crowds of friends, had heaps of proposals, and kept seven hundred pounds in hand. Now I think you will be willing to let me go; and you can lie easy and live happy for ever after."

Having launched the thunderbolt, she would have left the room, but Lord Northmuir, old and invalided as he was, sprang from his chair like an ardent youth and caught her arm.

"By Jove! you shan't leave me like that!" he cried. "You have made your first mistake, my dear. Instead of being in your power, you have put yourself in mine. I need fear you no longer. But as a trickster I love you no less than I did as a blackmailer. Indeed, I love you the more for your diabolical cleverness, you beautiful wretch! Stay with me, not as the little adopted cousin, living on charity, but as my wife, and mistress of this house. Or, if you will not, I shall denounce you to the police."

For once, Joan was dumfounded. The tables had been turned upon her with a vengeance. She gasped, and could not answer.

"You see, it is my turn to dictate terms now," said Lord Northmuir.

Joan's breath had come back. "You are right," she returned, in a meek voice. "I have given you the reins. But--well, it would be something to be Countess of Northmuir."

"Don't hope to be a widowed Countess," chuckled the old man. "I am only sixty-nine, and for the last ten years I have taken good care of myself."

"I count on nothing after this," said Joan.

"You consent, then?"

"How can I do otherwise?"

Lord Northmuir laughed out in his triumph over her. "The notice of the engagement will go to the *Morning Post* immediately," he said. "To-morrow, some of our friends will be surprised."

But it was he who was surprised; for, when to-morrow came, Joan had run away.

CHAPTER IX--A Journalistic Mission

It is like stating that the world is round to say that London is the best of hiding-places. It is the best, because there are many Londons, and one London knows practically nothing about any of the other Londons. When, therefore, Mercy Milton disappeared from Northmuir House, Belgrave Square, Joan Carthew promptly appeared at her old camping-ground, the boarding-house in Woburn Place.

Joan was no longer penniless, and as far as Lord Northmuir was concerned, she was easy in her mind. A man of his stamp was unlikely to risk the much-prized "honour of his name" to seek her with detectives; while, unassisted, he would have to shrug his weary old shoulders and resign himself to loss and loneliness.

But ambition kindled restlessness. She grudged wasting a moment when her fortune had to be made, her permanent place in life fixed. Besides, she was dissatisfied with her adventure in the house of Lord Northmuir. She had not come off badly, yet it galled her to remember that in self-defence she had been driven to confess her scheme to its victim, and that--this expedient not proving efficacious--she had eventually been forced to run away like the coward she was not. On the whole, she had to admit that if Lord Northmuir had not in the end got the better of her, he had come near to doing so. The sharp taste of failure was in her mouth, and the only way to be rid of it was to get the better of somebody else--somebody disagreeable, so that the sweets of success might be unmixed with bitterness.

Existence as Lord Northmuir's adopted relative had been deadly dull; existence as his wife would have been worse; and the remembrance of boredom was too vivid still for Joan to regret what she had sacrificed. Nevertheless, she realised that it had been a sacrifice which she would not a little while ago have believed herself fool enough, or wise enough, to be capable of making. She wanted her reward, and that reward must mean new excitements, difficulties, and dangers.

"I should like to do something big on a great London paper," she said to herself on the first night of her return to Woburn Place. "What fun to undertake a thrilling journalistic mission, and succeed better than any man! I wonder whether Mr. Mainbridge, who was a reporter on *The Planet*, is here still. He wasn't at dinner, but then he used often to be away. I must ask in the morning."

Joan went to sleep with this resolve in her mind, and before breakfast she had carried it out. Mr. Mainbridge was still one of Miss Witt's boarders, and had often inquired after Miss Carthew. He had come in late last night, was now asleep, but would be down to luncheon, and there was no doubt that he would be delighted to see the object of his solicitude.

All turned out as Miss Witt prophesied, and Joan was even nicer to the reporter than she had been before. He invited her to dine that evening at an Italian restaurant, and she consented. When they had come to the sweets, Mr. Mainbridge could control his pent-up feelings no longer, and was about to propose when Joan stopped him.

"We are too poor to indulge in the luxury of being in love," said she, with a sweet frankness which took the sting from the rebuff and dimly implied hope for the future. "I shall not marry until I am earning as much money as--as the man I love. I could not be happy unless I were independent. Oh, Mr. Mainbridge! if you do care to please me, prove it by introducing me to the editor of your paper! I want to ask him for work."

The stricken young man felt his throat suddenly dry. In his first acquaintance with Joan he had boasted of his "influence" with the powers that were upon that new and phenomenally successful daily, *The Planet*. As a matter of fact, the influence existed in Mainbridge's dreams, and there only. Sir Edmund Foster, the proprietor and editor, hardly knew him by sight, and probably would not recognise him out of Fleet Street. To ask such a favour as an introduction for a strange young girl, however attractive, was almost as much as the poor fellow's place was worth, but he could not bear to refuse Joan.

"Tell Sir Edmund that I have information, important to the paper, for his private ear," added the girl, reading her admirer's mind as if it had been a book.

"But--but if--er--you haven't really anything which he----" stammered Mainbridge.

"Oh, I have! I guarantee he shall be satisfied with me and not angry with you. Only I must see him alone. Tell him I come from"--Joan hesitated for an instant, but only for an instant--"from the Earl of Northmuir."

Mainbridge was impressed by the name and her air of self-confidence. Encouraged, he promised to use every effort to bring about the introduction, if possible the very next day. If he succeeded, he would telegraph Joan the time of the appointment, which would certainly not be earlier than three in the afternoon, as

Sir Edmund never appeared at the office until that hour.

"Then I won't stop for the telegram and give him a chance to change his mind before I can drive from Woburn Place to Fleet Street," said Joan. "I will be at the office at three in the afternoon, and wait until something is settled, if I have to wait till three in the morning."

The next day, after luncheon, Joan chose her costume with extreme care, as she invariably did when it was necessary to arm herself for conquest. Radiant in pale blue cloth edged with sable, she presented herself at the offices of *The Planet*. There was a waiting-room at the end of a long corridor, and there she was bidden to sit; but instead of remaining behind a closed door, as soon as her guide was out of sight she began walking up and down near the stairway where Sir Edmund Foster must sooner or later pass. She had never seen the famous man, but she remembered his photograph in one of the illustrated papers.

Presently a tall, smooth-shaven, sallow man, with eagle features and bags under his keen eyes, came rapidly along the corridor, accompanied by a much younger, less impressive man, who might have been a secretary. Joan advanced, pretending to be absorbed in thought, then stood aside with a start of shy surprise and a look nicely calculated to express reverence of greatness. Sir Edmund Foster glanced at the apparition and let his eyes linger for a few seconds as his companion rang the bell of the lift, close to the wide stone stairway.

"When he hears that there is a young woman waiting to see him, he will remember me, and the recollection may influence his decision," thought Joan, who did not under-value her beauty as an asset.

Perhaps it fell out as she hoped (things often did), for she had not read more than three or four back numbers of *The Planet*, which lay on the waiting-room table, when Ralph Mainbridge, flushed and almost tremulous with excitement, came to say that Sir Edmund had consented to see her at once.

Without seeming as much overpowered as he expected, the girl prepared to enter the presence of greatness. But she was not in reality as calm as she appeared. The thunderous whirr of the printing-machines had almost bereft her of the capacity for thought, just at the moment when she wished to think clearly. Her nerves were twanging like the strings of a violin which is out of tune, and it was an intense relief to be shot up in the alarmingly rapid lift to a quieter region. The rumbling roar was deadened on Sir Edmund's floor, and as the door of his private office closed on her, it was shut out altogether.

"Miss Carthew, from Lord Northmuir," the famous editor-proprietor said. "I believe you have some interesting information for me." He smiled with a certain dry benignity, for Joan was very pretty, and he was, after all, a man. "I think I saw you downstairs."

"I saw you, Sir Edmund." Joan's manner was dignified now, rather than

shy. "I trust you will not be angry, but within the last two hours everything has changed for me. Lord Northmuir, whom I know well through my cousin, Miss Mercy Milton, his ward (you may have heard of her; we are said to resemble each other), has now changed his mind about allowing the piece of information I meant for you to be published. He has forbidden his name to be used, but it was too late to stop that. I can only beg, for my cousin Miss Milton's sake more than my own, that you will not let the fact come to his ears; if it should, she will suffer."

"You need not fear that," Sir Edmund reassured her; "but if you have no information to give me, Miss--er----"

"I had to come and explain why I hadn't," Joan cut in. "I hope you won't blame poor Mr. Mainbridge for putting you to this trouble. It isn't his fault, and he doesn't even know."

"Who is Mr. Mainbridge? Oh, ah! yes, of course. Pray don't regard it as a trouble. Quite the contrary. But unfortunately, I----"

"You would say you are a very busy man," Joan threw into the editor's suggestive pause. "I won't take up much more of your time. But I want to say that, although I have nothing of value, as I hoped, to tell, I shall have later, if you will consent to engage me on your staff."

Sir Edmund laughed. He evidently considered Joan a spoiled darling of Society with a new whim. "My dear young lady!" he exclaimed, "in what capacity, pray? We do not devote space to fashions, even in a Saturday edition. Would you come to us as a reporter, like your friend Mr. Mainbridge?"

"As a special reporter," amended Joan. "I would undertake any mission of importance----"

"There are none going begging on *The Planet*. But" (this soothingly by way of sugaring a dismissal) "you have only to get hold of something good and bring it to me. For instance, some nice, spicy little item as to the truth of the rumoured alliance between Russia and Japan. We would pay you quite well for that, you know, provided you gave it to us in time to publish ahead of any other paper."

"How much would you pay me?" asked Joan, nettled at this chaffing tone of the famous man.

"Enough to buy a new frock and perhaps a few hairpins; say a hundred pounds."

"That isn't enough," said Joan; "I should want a thousand."

Sir Edmund turned a sudden, keen gaze upon the girl; then his face relaxed. "We might rise to that. At all events, I'm safe in promising it."

"It *is* a promise, then?"

"Oh, certainly."

"Thank you. Let me see if I understand clearly. I'm not quite the baby you think, Sir Edmund. I read the papers--yours especially--and take, I trust, an intel-

ligent interest in the political situation. Now, the latest rumour is that Russia is secretly planning an understanding with Japan and China. What you would like to know is whether there is truth in the rumour, and what, in that event, England would do."

"Exactly. That is what all the papers are dying to find out."

"If you could get the official news before any of them, you would give the person who obtained it for you a thousand pounds. If, in addition, they, or one of them--let us say *The Daily Beacon*--got the *wrong* news on the same day, you would no doubt add five hundred to the original thousand; for revenge is sweet, even to an editor, I suppose, and *The Beacon* has, I have heard, contrived to be first in the field on one or two important occasions within the last few years."

This allusion was a pin-prick in a sensitive place, for Joan was aware that *The Daily Beacon* and *The Planet* were deadly rivals as well as political opponents. Mainbridge had told her the tale of *The Planet's* humiliation by the enemy, and she had not forgotten. *The Beacon* had been able, at the very time when *The Planet* was arguing against their probability, to assert that certain political events would take place, and in time these statements had been justified, to the discomfiture of *The Planet*.

Sir Edmund frowned slightly. "*The Daily Beacon* possesses exceptional advantages," he sneered. "It is difficult for less favoured journals to compete with it for political information."

"I believe I can guess what you refer to," answered Joan. "I hear things, you know, from my cousin, Miss Milton." (This to shield Mainbridge.) "Lord Henry Borrowdaile, an Under Secretary of State, is a distant relative of Mr. Portheous, the proprietor of *The Daily Beacon*, and it is said that there has been a curious leakage of diplomatic secrets, once or twice, by which *The Beacon* profited."

"You are a well-informed young lady."

"I hope to earn your cheque as well as your compliment," said Joan. "Perhaps you will write it before many days have passed."

"It must be before many days, if at all."

"I understand that time presses, if you are to be first in the field, for the great secret can't be kept from the public for more than a week or ten days at most. But look here, Sir Edmund, would you go that extra five hundred if, on the day that your paper published the truth about the situation, *The Beacon* made a fool of itself by printing exactly the opposite?"

"Yes," said the editor, "I would."

"Well, we shall see what we shall see," returned Joan. She then took leave of Sir Edmund, who was certainly not in a mood to blame Mainbridge for an introduction under false pretences, even if he were far from sure that charming Miss Carthew could accomplish miracles.

As for Joan, her head was in a whirl. She wanted to do this thing more than she had ever wanted anything in her life, though it had not entered her head a few moments ago. She would not despise fifteen hundred pounds; but it was not of the money she was dreaming as she told her cabman to drive to Battersea Park, and keep on driving till ordered to stop. The strange girl could always collect and concentrate her thoughts while driving, and this was her object now.

Joan had never met Lord Henry Borrowdaile, but during her year at Northmuir House she had known people who were friends or enemies of the young man and his wife. She had her own reason for listening with interest to intimate talk about the character and private affairs of persons who were important figures in the world, for at any time she might wish to use knowledge thus gained. She did not believe, from what she had heard, that Lord Henry Borrowdaile, son of the Marquis of Wastwater, was a man to betray State secrets for money. He was "bookish" and literary, and though he was not rich, neither did he covet riches. But he did adore his beautiful young wife, and was said by those who knew him to be as wax in her hands. She was popular, as well as pretty; was vain of being the leader of a very gay set, and dressed as if her reputation depended upon being the best-gowned woman in London. Because Lady Henry posed as an *ingénue*, who scarcely knew politics from polo, Joan suspected her. "It is she who worms out secrets from her husband and sells them to Portheous," Joan said to herself. "Oh! to be a fly on the wall in the Borrowdailes' house for the next week!"

This wish was so vivid, that like a lightning flash it seemed to illumine the dim corners of the girl's brain. She suddenly recalled another story of the inestimable Mainbridge's, told in connection with the rivalry of *The Daily Beacon* and *The Planet*.

"An eminent statesman's servant told the secret of his master's intended resignation," she said to herself. "Why shouldn't a servant at the Borrowdailes---"

She did not finish out the thought at the moment; the vista it opened was too wide to be taken in at a glance. But after driving for an hour round and round Battersea Park, the patient cabman suddenly received an order to go quickly to Clarkson's, the wigmaker. At the shop, the hansom was discharged, and it was a very different-looking fare which another cab picked up at the same door somewhat later.

CHAPTER X--The Coup of "The Planet"

About half-past five, a plump old country-woman, with a brown tissue veil over her ruddy, wrinkled face, waddled into a green-grocer's not far from South Audley Street. She bade the young man in the shop a wheezy "Good day," and asked if she might be bold enough to inquire whether Lady Henry Borrowdaile's housekeeper were a customer. Yes, the youth admitted with pride, for anything in their line which was not sent up from the Marquis of Wastwater's, in the country, they had the honour of serving her Ladyship.

"Ah! I thought how it would be, your place being so near, and the nicest round about," said the old country-woman. "The truth is, I have to go to the house on a disagreeable errand. I volunteered to do it for a friend, and I've forgotten the number. I've to break some bad news to one of the housemaids."

"Not Miss Jessie Adams, I hope!" protested the young man, blushing up to the roots of his light hair.

"Yes, it is poor Jessie," said the old woman. "You know her?"

"We've been walking out together the last six months. I suppose her father's took bad again, or--or worse?"

"He's living--or was when I left; but----" and the old-fashioned bonnet with the veil shook ominously. "Well, I must go and do my duty. I hope she'll be able to get home for a week or so."

A few minutes later, Joan, delighted with her disguise and the detective skill she was developing, rang the servants' bell at the Borrowdailes'. She had learned what she had hoped to learn, the name of one of the maids, and she had also learned something more--the fact that Jessie Adams had a father whose state of health would afford an excuse for absence; and the existence of a lover, who would probably urge immediate marriage if there were enough money on either side.

The old countrywoman with the brown veil was voluble to the footman who opened the door. She explained that she had news from home for Jessie Adams,

and was shown into a servant's sitting-room, where presently appeared a fresh-looking girl with languishing eyes, and a full, weak mouth.

"Oh, I thought perhaps it would be Aunt Emmy!" exclaimed the young person in cap and apron.

"No, I'm not Aunt Emmy, but you may take it I'm a friend," replied the old woman. "Don't be frightened. Your father ain't so very bad, but your folks would be glad to have you at home if you could manage it. And, look here, my gell, here's good news for you. You may make a tidy bit of money by going, if you can get off at once--this very night. How much must you and that nice young man of yours put by before you can marry?"

"We can't marry till he sets up in business for himself, and it will take a hundred pounds at least," said the girl. "We've each got about ten pounds saved towards it. But what's ten pounds?"

"Added on to ninety it makes a hundred, and you can earn that by lending your place here for one fortnight to a niece of mine, who wants to be a journalist and write what the doings inside a smart house are like. She'd name no names, so you'd never be given away. All you'd have to do would be to tell the housekeeper your father was took bad, and would she let you go if you'd bring your cousin Maria in your stead--a clever, experienced girl, with the best references from Lord Northmuir's house?"

"My goodness me, you take my breath away!" gasped Jessie Adams. "How do I know but your niece is a thief who'd steal her Ladyship's jewels?"

"You don't know, except that I say she isn't. But, anyhow, what does it matter to you? You don't need to come back or ever be in service again. Here's the ninety pounds in gold, my dear. You can bite every piece, if you wish; and you've but to do what I say to get them before you walk out of this house. You settle matters with the housekeeper, and I'll have my niece call on her within the hour."

The girl with the languishing eyes and the weak mouth had her price, like many of her betters, and it happened to be exactly ninety pounds. Joan had brought a hundred, and considered that she had made a bargain. Jessie consented to speak to the housekeeper, and the countrywoman departed. By this time it was dusk. She took a four-wheeler and drove to the gates of the Park. In a dark and lonely spot the outer disguise was whisked off, and the paint wiped from her face. Underneath her shawl she wore a neat black dress, suitable for a housemaid in search of a situation. This, too, Joan had thoughtfully obtained at Clarkson's, whence her pale blue cloth had been despatched by messenger to Woburn Place. The bonnet was quickly shaped into a hat; the stuffing which had plumped out the thin, girlish form was wrapped in the shawl which had concealed it, and hidden under a bush. Joan's own hair was combed primly back from her forehead, and strained so tightly at the sides as to change the expression of her face completely.

"Cousin Maria" was as different from Miss Joan Carthew as a mouse is from a bird of Paradise.

Cream could not be more velvety soft than Joan's voice, the eye of a dove more mild than hers, as she conversed with Lady Henry Borrowdaile's housekeeper. And she was armed with a magnificent reference. There had been a Maria Jordan at Lord Northmuir's, as housemaid, in Joan's day there, but the real Maria had gone to America, and it was safe and simple to write in praise of this young person's character and accomplishments, signing the document Mercy Milton. At worst, even if Lady Henry's housekeeper sent the reference to Lord Northmuir's housekeeper, the imposition could not be proved. Maria might have had time to come back from America, and Miss Milton, now departed, might have consented to please the housemaid by giving her a written recommendation.

But Maria Jordan's manner as an applicant to fill her cousin's place was so respectful and respectable, and the need to decide was so pressing, that Lady Henry's housekeeper resolved to accept Jordan, so to speak, on face value. That same night Jessie Adams went home (or somewhere else), and her cousin stepped into the vacant niche.

Meanwhile, Joan had, on the plea of picking up her luggage, driven to one or two cheap shops in the Tottenham Court Road, and provided herself with a tin box and a suitable outfit for a superior housemaid. She was thankful to find that she would have a room to herself, and delighted to discover that Jessie Adams and Mathilde, Lady Henry's own maid, had been on terms of friendship. Their rooms adjoined; Jessie had been teaching Mathilde English in odd moments, and Mathilde had often obligingly carried messages to the enamoured greengrocer.

Joan lost not a moment in winning her way into Mathilde's good graces, wasting the less time because she had already made preparations with a view to such an end. She had bought a large box of delicious sweets, which she pretended her own "young man" had given her, and this she placed at the French girl's disposal. It happened that Lady Henry was dining out and going to the theatre afterwards that night, and Mathilde, being free, visited Maria easily in her room, where she sat on the bed, swinging her well-shod feet and eating cream chocolates. Maria, in the course of conversation, chanced to mention that her "young man" was the partner of a French hairdresser in Knightsbridge; that the two were intimate friends; that the hairdresser was young, singularly handsome, well-to-do, and looking out for a Parisienne as a wife. This Admirable Crichton was in France at present, on business, Maria added, but he would return in the course of a fortnight, when Maria's "young man" should effect an introduction, as she was sure that Monsieur Jacques would fall in love at first sight with Mathilde.

Mathilde pretended indifference, but she thought Maria the nicest girl she had met in England, far more *chic* than Jessie; and when she heard that her new

friend longed to be a lady's maid, she offered to coach her in the art. Maria was gushingly grateful, for though she had (she said) already acted as maid to one or two ladies, they had not been "swells" like Lady Henry, and lessons from Mathilde would be of inestimable value.

"I suppose," she went on coaxingly, "that if I showed you I could do hair nicely, and understood what was wanted of a lady's maid, you wouldn't be took ill, and give me a chance to try my hand on Lady Henry? Practice on her Ladyship would be worth a lot of lessons, wouldn't it? My goodness! I'd give all my savings for such a chance in a house like this! Think of the help it would be to me afterwards to say I'd been understudy, as you might call it, to a real expert like Mathilde, Lady Henry Borrowdaile's own maid, and given great satisfaction in the part! It might mean a good place for me. I ain't jokin', mademoiselle. I've got twenty-five sovereigns saved up, and if you'll have neuralgia so bad you can't lift your head from the pillow for three or four days, those twenty-five sovereigns are yours."

"*Mais*, for me to have ze neuralgia, it do not make that milady take you for my place," said the laughing Mathilde.

"No, but leave that to me. You shall have the money just the same."

"All right," said Mathilde, giggling, scarce believing that her friend was in earnest. "I have ze neuralgia *demain--to-morrow*."

Joan sprang up and went to the new tin box. She bent over it for a moment, with her back to Mathilde; then she turned, with a stocking in her hand--a stocking fat in the foot, and tied round the ankle with a bit of ribbon. "Count what's there," she exclaimed, emptying the stocking in Mathilde's lap.

There were gold and silver, and even a little copper. Altogether, the sum amounted to that which Maria had named, and a few shillings over.

Mathilde was dazzled. What with this bird in hand, and another in the bush (the eligible hairdresser), she was ready to do almost anything for Maria. Later that night, in undressing Lady Henry, she complained of suffering such agony that she feared for the morrow. Luckily, should she be incapacitated for a short time, there was a girl now in the house (a young person in the place of the first housemaid, absent on account of trouble in the family) who had been lady's maid and knew her business. Lady Henry was too sleepy to care what might happen to-morrow--indeed, scarcely listened to Mathilde's murmurings; but when to-morrow was to-day, and a sweet-faced, sweet-voiced girl announced that Mathilde could not leave her bed, the spoiled beauty remembered last night's conversation. After some grumbling, she consented to try what Jordan could do; and while the second housemaid pouted over Maria's work, Maria was busy ingratiating herself with Lady Henry--ingratiating herself so thoroughly that Mathilde would have trembled jealously for the future could she have seen or heard. Joan

was one of those rare creatures, born for success, who set their teeth in unbreakable resolve to do whatever they must do, well. Being a lady herself, with all a lady's fastidious tastes, she knew how a lady liked to be waited upon. She was not attracted by Lady Henry, whom men called an angel, and women "a cat," but she was as attentive as if her whole happiness depended on her mistress's approbation. Mathilde was efficient, but frivolous and flighty, sometimes inclined to sulkiness; and Lady Henry, superbly indifferent to the sufferings of servants, decided that she would not be sorry if Mathilde were ill a long time.

Two or three days went by; Joan kept the Parisienne supplied with *bonbons* and French novels, and carried up all her meals, arranged almost as daintily as if they had been for her Ladyship. Mathilde was happy, and Joan was--waiting. But her patience was not to be tried for long.

On the third day, she was told that her mistress was dining at home, alone with Lord Henry. This was such an unusual event that Joan was sure it meant something, especially when Lady Henry demanded one of her prettiest frocks. A footman, inclined to be Maria's slave, was smiled upon, intercepted during dinner, and questioned. "They're behaving like turtle-doves," said he.

Joan had expected this. "That little cat has guessed or discovered that everything is settled, and she means to get the truth out of him this evening, so that somehow she can give the news to *The Daily Beacon* to-night, in time to go to press for to-morrow," the girl reflected.

She was excited, but the great moment had come, and she kept herself rigidly under control, for much depended upon calmness and fertility in resource. "They will have their coffee in Lady Henry's boudoir," Joan reflected, "and that is when she will get to work."

She thought thus on her way upstairs, carrying a dress of Lady Henry's, from which she had been brushing the marks of a muddy carriage-wheel. She laid it on a chair, and saw on another a milliner's box. Her mistress had not mentioned that she was expecting anything, and Joan's curiosity was aroused. She untied the fastenings, lifted a layer of tissue paper, and saw a neat, dark green tailor-dress, with a toque made of the same material and a little velvet. There was also a long, plain coat of the green cloth, with gold buttons, and on the breast pocket was embroidered an odd design in gold thread.

Joan suddenly became thoughtful. This dress was as unlike as possible to the butterfly style which Lady Henry affected, and all who knew her knew that she detested dark colours. Yet this costume was distinctly sombre and severe; and the name of the milliner was unfamiliar to Joan.

"It's like a disguise," the girl said to herself, "and I'll bet anything that's what it's for. She went to a strange milliner; she made a point of the things being ready to-night; she chose a costume which would absolutely change her appearance,

if worn with a thick veil. And then that bit of embroidery on the pocket! Why, it's a miniature copy of the design they print under the title of *The Beacon*. It is a beacon, flaming! She means to slip out of the house when she's got the secret safe, and somebody at the office of the paper will have been ordered to take a veiled woman with such a dress as this up to Portheous' private office, without her speaking a word. Well--a woman will go there, but I hope it won't be Lady Henry."

Without stopping for an instant's further reflection, Joan caught up the box and flew with it to her own room, where she pushed it under the bed. She then watched her chance, and when no one was in sight, darted into the boudoir, where she squeezed herself behind a screen close to the door. She might have found a more convenient hiding-place, but this, though uncomfortable, gave her an advantage. If the two persons she expected to enter the room elected to sit near the fireplace, as they probably would, Joan might be able to steal noiselessly away without being seen or heard.

She had not had much time to spare, for ten minutes after she had plastered herself against the wall, Lord and Lady Henry came in. They went to the sofa in front of the fire and chatted of commonplaces until after the coffee and *Orange Marnier* had been brought. Then Lady Henry took out her jewelled cigarette-case, gave a cigarette to her husband and took one herself. To light hers from his, she perched on Lord Henry's knee, remaining in that position to play with his hair, her white fingers flashing with rings. She cooed to her husband prettily, saying how nice it was to be with him alone, and how it grieved her to see him weary and worried.

"Is the old Russian Bear going to take hands and dance prettily with little Japan and big China, darling?" she purred. "You know, precious, talking to me is as safe as talking to yourself."

"I know, my pet. Thank goodness, the strain is over. England and France together have brought such pressure to bear, that Russia was in a funk. The ultimatum we issued----"

"Oh, then, the ultimatum *was sent?*"

"Yes. If Russia had held firm, nothing could have prevented war. But for obvious diplomatic reasons, the papers must not be able to state officially that any negotiations of the sort have ever taken place. There has been a rumour, but that will die out."

"Ah, well, I'm glad there won't be war; but as *you're* not a soldier, and can't be killed, it wouldn't have broken my heart. Kiss me and let's talk of something amusing. Your poor pet gets a headache if she has to think of affairs of State too long."

Joan did not wait for the end of the last sentence. She began with the utmost

caution to move the farther end of the screen forward, until she could reach the door-handle. With infinite patience she turned the knob at the rate of an inch a minute, until it was possible to open the door. Then she pulled it slowly, very slowly, towards her. At last she could slip into the corridor, where she had an instant of sickening fear lest she should be detected by a passing servant. Luck was with her, however; but instead of seizing the chance to run upstairs unseen, she stopped, shut the door as softly as it had been opened, and then knocked. Lady Henry's voice, with a ring of relief, called "Come in!" Joan showed herself on the threshold, and announced that a person from Frasquet's, of George Street, had called to say that by mistake a costume ordered by Lady Henry had been sent to the wrong address, but that search would at once be made, and the box brought to South Audley Street as soon as found.

Lady Henry sprang up with an exclamation of anger, and called down the vengeance of the gods upon the house of Frasquet.

"Might I suggest, your Ladyship, that I go with the messenger, and make sure of bringing back the box, if the dress is a valuable one?" asked Joan.

Lady Henry caught at this idea. Joan was bidden to run away and not to come back till she had the box. "I will give you a sovereign if you bring it home before midnight," she added.

Joan walked calmly out with the box from Frasquet's, took a cab, and drove to Woburn Place, where, in her own room, she dressed herself as Lady Henry had intended to be dressed. The frock and coat fitted sufficiently well, for Jordan and her mistress were somewhat of the same figure. An embroidered black veil, with one of chiffon underneath, completely hid her features; and, heavily perfumed with Lady Henry's favourite scent, at precisely a quarter to eleven she presented herself at the office of *The Daily Beacon*. A gesture of a gloved hand towards the flaming gold on the coat was as if a password had been spoken. She was conducted to a private office on the first floor, and there received by a bearded, red-faced man, who sprang up on her entrance.

"Well--well?" he demanded.

The veiled and scented lady put her finger to her lips.

"Sh!" she breathed. Then, disguising her voice by whispering, she went on. "Russia China, and Japan have signed the alliance, in spite of England and France, whom they have defied very insolently, and it's only a question of a short time before the storm breaks. There! That's all, in a nutshell. I must run away at once."

[image]

"*Sh!*" she breathed."

"A thousand thanks! You're a brick!" Mr. Portheous pressed the gloved hand and left a cheque in it. "We shall go to press with this immediately."

Joan glanced at the cheque, saw it was for seven hundred pounds, and despised Lady Henry for cheapening the market. Her waiting cab drove her a few streets farther on, to the office of *The Planet*. A card with the name of Miss Carthew, and "Important private business" scrawled upon it, was the "Open, sesame!" to Sir Edmund Foster's door.

"Have you your cheque-book handy?" she nonchalantly asked.

"What for?"

"*Quid pro quo.*" Joan rushed into her whole story, which she told from beginning to end, proving its truth by showing Mr. Portheous' cheque made out to Mrs. Anne Randall. "Lady Henry, no doubt, has an account somewhere under that name. She's too sharp to use her own," added the girl. "Do you believe me now?"

"Yes. You're wonderful. I shall risk printing the news exactly as you have given it to me."

"You won't regret your trust. But I don't want your cheque to-night. I'll take it to-morrow, when I can say: 'I told you so.'"

"Would you still like to come on our staff--at a salary of ten pounds a week?"

"No, thank you, Sir Edmund. I've brought off my big *coup*, and anything more in the newspaper line would be, I fear, an anticlimax. Besides, I want to play with my fifteen hundred pounds."

"What shall you do now?"

"Go back to the house which has the honour of being my home, change my clothes, hurry breathlessly to South Audley Street, and inform Lady Henry that her costume can't be found. She will then, in desperation, decide to send a note to *The Daily Beacon*, which, my prophetic soul whispers, she will order me to take."

"Shall you go?"

"Out of the house, yes--never, never to return, for my work there is done. But not to the office of *The Beacon*. Lady Henry's box shall be sent to her by parcel post to-morrow morning, and Mrs. Randall's cheque will be in the coat pocket. That will surprise her a little, but it won't matter to me; for, after having called here for my cheque, I think I'll take the two o'clock train for the Continent. I shall have plenty of money to enjoy myself, and I feel I need a change of air."

"You are wonderful!" repeated Sir Edmund Foster.

CHAPTER XI--Kismet and a V.C.

"Now, where on earth have I seen that girl before?" Joan Carthew asked herself.

It was at Biarritz, where she was enjoying, as she put it to herself, a well-earned holiday; and she was known at her hotel, and among the few acquaintances she had made, as the Comtesse de Merival, a young widow with plenty of money. She was a Comtesse because it is easy to say that one has married a sprig of foreign nobility, without being found out; she was a widow because it is possible for a widow to be alone, unchaperoned, and to amuse herself without ceasing to be *comme il faut*.

Joan had amused herself a great deal during the six weeks since she had left England, and the cream of the amusement had consisted in inventing a romantic story about herself and getting it believed. It was as good as acting in a successful play which one has written for oneself.

At the present moment she was walking on the *plage*, pleasantly conscious that she was one of the prettiest and best-dressed women among many who were pretty and well-dressed. Then a blonde girl passed her, a blonde girl who was new to Biarritz, but who, somehow, did not seem new to Joan's retina. Her photograph was somewhere in the book of memory, and, oddly enough, it seemed to have a background of sea and blue sky, as it had to-day.

The girl was pretty, as a beautifully dressed, golden-haired doll in a shop window is pretty. She was also exceedingly "good form," and she was vouched for as a young person of importance by a remarkably distinguished-looking old man who strolled beside her.

They turned, and in passing the "Comtesse" for the second time, the girl looked full in Joan's face, with a lingering gaze such as a spoiled beauty often directs upon a possible rival.

Then, all in an instant, Joan knew.

"Why," she reminded herself, "it's the girl I saw at Brighton--the girl I envied. I know it is she. That's eight years ago, but I can't be mistaken."

Somehow this seemed an important discovery. If Joan, a miserable, over-worked slavey of twelve, nursing her tyrant's baby, had not been bitten with consuming jealousy of a child no older but a thousand times more fortunate than herself, she might have gone on indefinitely as a slavey, and might never have had a career.

The little girl at Brighton had looked scornfully from under her softly drooping Leghorn hat at the shabby child-nurse, and a rage of resentment had boiled in Joan's passionate young heart. Now, the tall girl at Biarritz looked with half-reluctant admiration from under an equally becoming hat at the Comtesse de Merival, who was more beautiful and apparently quite as fortunate as she. Nevertheless the old scar suddenly throbbed again, so that Joan remembered there had once been a wound; and she knew that she had no gratitude for the girl to whom, indirectly, she owed her rise in the world.

Joan was usually generous to women, even when she had no cause to love them, for, with all her faults, there was nothing of the "cat" in her nature; yet, to her surprise, she felt that she would like to hurt this girl in some way. "What a brute I must be!" she said to herself. "I didn't know I was so bad. Really I mustn't let this sort of thing grow on me, otherwise I shall degenerate from a highwayman (rather a gallant one, I think) into a cad, and I should lose interest in foraging for myself if I were a cad."

As she thought this, the girl and her companion were joined by a man. Joan glanced, then gazed, and decided that he was the most interesting man to look at whom she had ever seen in her life. Not that he was the handsomest, as mere beauty of feature goes, but he was of exactly the type which Joan and most women admire at heart above all others.

One did not need to be told, to know that he was a soldier. As he stood talking to his friends, with his hat off, and the sun chiselling the ripples of his close-cropped hair in bronze, his head towered above those of the other men who came and went. His face was bronze, too, of a lighter shade, blending into ivory half way up the forehead, and his features were strong and clear-cut as a bronze man's should always be. He wore no moustache or beard, and his mouth and chin were self-reliant, firm, and generous, but Joan liked his eyes best of all. As she passed slowly, they met hers for a second, and their clear depths were brown and bright as a Devonshire brook when the noonday sun shines into it.

It was only for a second that the man's soul looked at her from its windows, but it was long enough to make her sharply realise two facts. One, that she was far, far beneath him; the other, that he was the only man in the world for her.

"To think that *that* girl should know him, and I not!" she said to herself

rebelliously. "He is miles too good for me, but he's more miles too good for her, because she hasn't any soul, and I have, even though it's a bad one. Again, after all these years, that girl passes through my life, taking with her as she goes what I would give all I own, all I might ever gain, to have. It's Kismet--nothing less."

"Ah, *Comtesse, bon jour!*" murmured a voice that Joan knew, and then it went on in very good English, with only a slight foreign accent: "You are charming to-day, but you do not see your friends. They must remind you of their existence before they can win a bow."

"I have just seen some one who was like a ghost out of the past," returned Joan, with a careless smile for the handsome, dark young man who had stopped to greet her.

"What!" his face lighted up. "You know that young lady you were looking at? That is indeed interesting, and I will tell you why, presently, if you will let me. If you would but introduce me--at all events, to the father. The rest I can do for myself."

"I don't know her," said Joan, "although an important issue of my life was associated with the girl. I can't even give you her name."

"I can do as much as that for you," said the Marchese Villa Fora. "She is a Miss Violet Ffrench, and the old man is her father, General Ffrench. Not only is she one of the greatest beauties, but one of the greatest heiresses in England."

"Ah!" said Joan, "no wonder you are interested."

"No wonder. But what good does that do to me, since I have not the honour of her acquaintance, and since she is to marry that great, bronze statue of a fellow?"

A pang shot through Joan's heart, and she was ashamed because it was a jealous pang. "She is to marry him! How do you know that, since you are not acquainted with her?"

"It is an open secret. I saw the father and daughter in Paris three weeks ago, and fell in love at first sight--ah! you may laugh. You Englishwomen cannot understand us Latins. It is true that I proposed to you, but you would not take me, and my heart was soon after caught in the rebound. It is very simple."

"You thought that you fell in love with me at first sight, too; at least, you said so, and without any introduction except picking up my purse when I dropped it in the Champs Élysées."

"I got an introduction afterwards."

"Yes, a lady who was staying at my hotel."

"At all events, she vouched for me. She has known my family for years, in Madrid."

"She warned me against you, Marchese. She said that you were a fortune-hunter, and that you fancied I was rich. When you had proposed, and I had told

you frankly that my fortune was but silver-gilt, warranted to keep its colour for a few years only, you were very much obliged to me for refusing you, as it saved you the trouble of jilting me afterwards. You are still more obliged to me now that you have met a genuine heiress who has all other desirable qualifications as well."

"You are cruel," exclaimed Villa Fora, to whose style of good looks reproaches were becoming. "Cannot a man love twice? What does it matter to the heart whether there has been an interval of weeks or of years? I am madly in love with Miss Ffrench, and as you promised to be my friend if I would 'talk no more nonsense,' I have no hesitation in confessing it to you. I followed her here from Paris, and arrived only this afternoon. She is at the Hotel Victoria; therefore, so am I."

"So am I, but not 'therefore,'" cut in Joan. "And the--the man you say she is to marry?"

"Colonel Sir Justin Wentworth? He is at the Grand. But he has come for her. I know the whole story--I have it from a gossiping old lady who is *au courant* with every one's affairs if they are worth bothering with; and she does not make mistakes. She has told me that General Ffrench was the guardian of this Sir Justin, that the father--a baronet--was his dearest friend. The match has been an understood thing ever since Wentworth was eighteen and the girl five; for there is quite thirteen years' difference in their ages."

"Then he is about thirty-four or five," said Joan thoughtfully.

"Yes, but in that I am not interested. The awful part for me is that the girl is now of age, and the obstacle of her youth no longer prevents the marriage. Any day the worst may happen. If I could only meet her, I might have a chance to undermine the cold, bronze statue, even though he has a great reputation as a soldier, and is a V.C. But how to manage an introduction? The father has the air of a mediaeval dragon."

Joan's heart said: "The man is not a cold statue," but aloud she remarked: "I see now why you hoped that I knew Miss Ffrench. You wanted *me* to manage it. Well, perhaps I can, even as it is. I have undertaken more difficult things and succeeded."

"Oh, if you would! But why should I hope it, since you have nothing to gain?"

Joan dropped her eyes and did not answer.

"Yet you will try?" pleaded Villa Fora.

"Yet I will try, on one condition. You must be a connection of the late Comte de Merival."

"Your husband!"

Joan smiled as she nodded.

"I am Spanish; he was, I understand, French. But then that presents no difficulty. There are such things as international marriages."

"Yes. Your mother's sister married an uncle of my husband's, didn't she?"

"Quite so. It is settled," agreed the Marchese gravely.

"Well, then, that is the sharp end of the wedge. I will do my best and cleverest to insert it," said Joan. "As you have just arrived, it will be the easier. We are cousins. It can appear to all those whom it does not concern (meaning the gossips of the hotel) that you have run on to see your cousin. For the rest, you must trust me for a day or two, or perhaps more."

Joan had tea--with her cousin--at Miremont's; and they saw the Ffrenches and Sir Justin Wentworth, also having tea. Violet Ffrench looked at Joan with the same side-glance of half-grudging admiration as before, and Joan looked, now and then, at Violet Ffrench with a charming, frank gaze, which seemed to say: "You are so sweetly pretty that I can't keep my eyes off you, and I like you for being pretty." In reality it said something quite different, but it was effects, not realities, which mattered at the moment.

Thus the campaign had begun, though the enemy was blissfully ignorant of the activity upon the other side.

Joan went back to the hotel rather earlier than she had intended, and going straight to the large, empty dining-room, rang for the head waiter. When he appeared, she asked if it were yet arranged where a new arrival, General Ffrench, was to sit with his daughter. The waiter pointed out a small table or two, near the centre of the room; but before his hand withdrew from the gesture, it was turned palm upward in answer to a slight, silent hint from Joan. Finally, it retired with a louis in its clasp. "I want you to put my table close to theirs," said she. "It shall be done, madame," replied the man; and it was done. Therefore Joan and Violet could scarcely help exchanging more glances from between their red-shaded candles that night at dinner, which Joan ate alone, unaccompanied by the wistful Villa Fora.

The Ffrenches appeared to know nobody in the hotel, and of this she was glad. There was the more chance for her.

After dinner there was conjuring, and Joan contrived to sit next to Miss Ffrench. Villa Fora was on the opposite side of the big drawing-room, where he had reluctantly gone in obedience to his "cousin's" instructions. The conjuring made conversation, and Joan was not surprised to find the heiress open to flattery. When the performance was over, she kept her seat; and by this time, having introduced herself to Miss Ffrench, the introduction was passed on to the father. He, good man, was too well-born to be actually a snob, but he had no objection to titles, even foreign ones, and the Comtesse de Merival was so pretty, so modest, altogether such good form, that he had no objection to her as, at least, an hotel

acquaintance for his daughter.

It seemed that General Ffrench had been ordered to Biarritz for his health, and that he hoped to do some golfing; but Miss Ffrench hated golf, and as she had no friends in the place, she expected to be very dull.

At this, Joan reminded her gaily of the friend with whom she and her father had been walking in the afternoon.

"Oh, but he is such an old friend, he doesn't count," exclaimed Violet, blushing a little.

"She isn't a bit in love with him," thought Joan. "What a shame! But--*tant mieux*. She is vain and romantic; often the two qualities go together in a woman. The ground is all prepared for me."

By and by, Sir Justin Wentworth strolled in from his hotel. Though she was dying to stay and meet him, and perhaps have a few words, Joan rose and walked away. This course was approved by General Ffrench. He would have known what to think if the beautiful Comtesse had made herself fascinating, at such short notice, to his son-in-law elect.

Joan talked with her "cousin," who had been in the smoking-room, and Violet Ffrench had time to be intensely curious as to the connection between her charming new acquaintance, the Comtesse de Merival, and the handsome, dark young man who had been in her hotel at Paris. He had looked at her then; he looked at her now. What was he to the Comtesse? what was the Comtesse to him?

Next morning, both General Ffrench and Sir Justin Wentworth walked off to the golf-links, leaving Violet to write letters in the glass room that looked out on the sea. Presently Joan came in, with a writing-case in her hand, and Violet stopped in the midst of the first sentence of her first letter. Joan did not even begin to write, nor had she ever cherished the faintest intention of doing so.

Violet rather hoped that she would mention the dark young man, but she did not; and then, of course, Violet hoped it a great deal more. The two girls drifted from one subject to another, and finally, by way of a favourite author and a popular novel of the moment, they touched the key of romance.

"I used to think that romance was dead in this century, but lately I have been finding out that it isn't," said Joan. "Oh, not personally. Romance is over for me. I loved my husband, you see, and he died the day of our wedding; I married him on his death-bed. That is not romance; it is tragedy. But I am speaking of what I should not speak of, to you, so let us talk of something else."

"Why?" asked Violet.

"Oh, because--because I have an idea that you are engaged."

"How can that matter?"

"It does matter. I oughtn't to explain, so you mustn't urge me."

"You rouse my curiosity," said Violet; but this was not news to Joan.

"Engaged girls shouldn't have curiosity about anything outside their own romances," replied the Comtesse de Merival mysteriously.

"I've never had a real romance," sighed Violet. "I've always been more or less engaged to Sir Justin Wentworth ever since I can remember. He is a splendid fellow, as you can see."

"I hardly noticed," said Joan; then added, in a whisper, but not too low a whisper to be heard: "I was so busy pitying someone else."

Violet's colour rose, and she was really a very pretty girl, though vanity made her eyes cold.

"Sir Justin's father and mine were old chums," went on Violet. "Our place and his lie close together in Devonshire. We have even some of the same money-interests--mines in Australia. He has heaps of money, too, so there's no question of his needing to think of mine."

"As if any man could think of your money when he had you to think of!" exclaimed Joan. "No doubt you will be very happy. Such a long friendship ought to be a good foundation for the rest, and yet--and yet--it's a pity that you should have to marry and become a placid British matron without first knowing some of the wild joys of *real* love, real romance."

"I thought you doubted there being any left in the world?"

"No; I said I had found at least one case which had built up my faith again; a case of passionate love, born at first sight, and strong enough to carry the man across the world, if necessary, to follow the woman he loves."

"Such love isn't likely to come my way."

"It has come your way. It is here--close to you. Oh, I have done wrong! I should not have spoken. But I am so sorry for him--my poor, handsome cousin."

"Your cousin!" This was a revelation, and Violet's eyes were not cold now, but warm with interest.

"Yes, the Marchese Villa Fora, the best-looking and one of the best-born young men in Spain. But indeed we must not talk of him. What a lovely day it is! I must have my motor-car out this afternoon. How I should love to take you with me!"

Violet would ask no more questions; but all that had been dark was now clear, and she could think of nothing and no one except the Comtesse's cousin, the Marchese Villa Fora.

Joan had been in the hotel at Biarritz for ten days, and by the trick of "being nice" (she knew how to be very nice) to the unattached old ladies and middle-aged dowagers, she had been accepted on her own valuation. She did not flirt, she had a title, she appeared to be rich, she owned a motor-car, therefore none of her statements regarding herself was doubted. General Ffrench made an inquiry

or two concerning her, was satisfied with the replies, and therefore consented to let his daughter join an automobile party arranged by the Comtesse for the afternoon.

Somehow, in the motor-car, Violet sat next to the Marchese Villa Fora, who gazed at her sadly with magnificent eyes and said very little. It was extremely interesting, she discovered, to sit shoulder to shoulder with a man who was dying of hopeless love for you, and had followed you across France, though he had never spoken a word to you until to-day. It was he who helped her out when they came back to the hotel, and the thrill in her fingers after his had pressed them almost convulsively for an instant remained for a long time.

CHAPTER XII--A New Love and an Old Enemy

Now, the thin end of the entering wedge, of which Joan had hinted, was well in, and after this day events moved swiftly. The Comtesse de Merival and Miss Ffrench were close friends. Violet opened her heart to Joan and told her everything that was in it--not a long list. Joan sympathised and advised. She did so want dear Violet to be happy, she said, for happiness was the best thing in the world; and love was happiness. She wanted her to have that.

The two girls were together constantly, and this meant that Joan soon began to see a good deal of Sir Justin Wentworth. Quickly she diagnosed that he cared nothing for Violet Ffrench, except in a kindly, protective, affectionate way, but that he had a deep regard for her father. He would never try to free himself of the tacit understanding into which he had drifted as a boy; if any change were to come, the initiative must be taken, and firmly taken, by Violet.

Meanwhile, two things were happening. If Violet was not precisely falling in love with Villa Fora, she was in love with the idea of him which was growing up in her mind; and Justin Wentworth had discovered that he craved for something more in life than Violet Ffrench could ever give him.

He had gone on contentedly enough for the several years during which he had definitely thought of the marriage. There had been the Boer war, and then

the interest of coming home to England and his beautiful old place in Devonshire, which he loved. But now, quite suddenly, he had awakened to the fact that contentment is no better than desperate resignation; and though he was hardly aware of it yet, the awakening had come to him when looking into Joan's eyes.

He would not confess to himself that he loved her, but he thought that she was the most vivid creature he had ever met, and he could not help realising how curiously congenial they were in most of their thoughts. Often he seemed to feel what she was feeling, without a word being spoken on either side, and unconsciously he was jealous of the handsome Spanish cousin with whom (General Ffrench innocently suggested) the Comtesse would probably make a match.

Joan, on her part, cared too much by this time to be able to see clearly, where her own affairs were concerned. She had begun the little comedy she was playing not for the sake of Villa Fora, but for her own, with the deliberate intention of separating Violet Ffrench from Justin Wentworth, even though she might never come any nearer to him herself. All the machinery which she had set going was running smoothly. Violet was fascinated by Villa Fora, was meeting him secretly and receiving notes from him; he was determined to bring matters to a climax soon, and was sure of his success. General Ffrench played golf all day, bridge half the night, and suspected nothing; nor, apparently, did any one else. Still, Joan was more miserable than she had ever been in her life--far more miserable than when Lady Thorndyke had died without making a new will and left her penniless.

The girl saw herself at last as she was, unscrupulous, an adventuress, living on her wits and the lack of wits in others. She hated herself, and worshipped more and more each day the honourable soldier from whom her own unworthiness (if there were no other barrier) must, she felt, put her irrevocably apart.

Even as Joan talked to Violet of Wentworth and Villa Fora, outwardly agreeing with the girl that the one was cold, that it was the other who knew how to love, her whole soul was in rebellion against itself. "He does not think of me at all," she would repeat over and over again, despite the secret voice of instinct which whispered a contradiction. "He doesn't think of me; and even if he did, he would only have to know half the truth to despise me as the vilest of women."

Then, one day, there was a great scandal at the hotel. The Marchese Villa Fora had run away with Miss Violet Ffrench, in the Comtesse de Merival's motor-car, which lately he had been learning to drive. Even Joan was taken by surprise, for she had not known that the thing was going to happen so soon. She was actually able to tell the truth--or something approaching the truth--when she assured the father and the deserted *fiancé* that she was innocent of complicity. So candid were her beautiful, wet eyes, so tremulous her sweet voice, and so pale the delicate oval of her cheeks, that both men believed her, and one of them was so happy in this sudden relief from the weight of a great burden that he could have

sung aloud.

General Ffrench was far from happy; but he determined that, rather than give fuel to the scandal, he would make the best of things as they were. To this course he was partly persuaded by the counsels of Justin Wentworth. Villa Fora was undoubtedly what he pretended to be, a Spanish marquis of very ancient and honourable lineage, though it would take many golden bricks to rebuild the family castle in Spain. The girl had gone with him, and gone too far before the truth came out to be brought back with good grace, therefore it were well to let her become the Marchesa Villa Fora quietly, without useless ragings.

The thing Joan had set herself to accomplish was done; she had separated Justin Wentworth and Violet Ffrench for ever, and now the end had come. She was hurt and sore, and could hardly bear to see her own face in the glass, for she imagined that it had grown hard and cruel--that Justin Wentworth must find it so.

General Ffrench openly announced his daughter's marriage to the Marchese Villa Fora, and told all inquirers that he was going to join her in Madrid; but Justin Wentworth would not, of course, accompany his old friend on such a mission. He would set his face towards England, and with this intention he said "Good-bye" to the Comtesse de Merival.

"This has hurt and shocked you, too," he said. "There is one thing I must say to you, and it is this: it is only for her father that I care. I want her to be happy in her own way. We did not suit each other."

"I used sometimes to think not," Joan answered in a voice genuinely broken. "I used to be afraid that--if you should ever marry--you would not have been happy. Perhaps she--wasn't the right one for you."

Her eyes were downcast, but the compelling power of love in the man's caught them up to his and held them.

"I have known that she wasn't the right one for a long time," he said. "I have known the right one, and it is you. I love you with all my heart. I want you. You are the one woman on earth for me. I hadn't meant to say this now, but--I can't let you go out of my life. I must do all I can to keep you always."

"Don't!" gasped Joan. "Don't! it will kill me. Oh, if you only knew, how you would hate me!"

"Nothing could make me hate you."

"Yes. Wait!" And then Joan poured out the whole story--not only of this last fraud, but of all the frauds; the story of her "career."

He listened to the end, without interrupting her once. Then, at last, when the strange tale was finished, and the pale girl was silent from sheer exhaustion of the hopeless spirit tasting its punishment in purgatory, he held out his arms.

"Poor, little, lonely girl!" he said. "How sorry I am for you! How I want to comfort and take care of you all the rest of your life, so that it may be clear and

white, as your true self would have it be! And--how glad I am that you're not a widowed Comtesse!"

She was in his arms still when a knock at the door roused them both from the first dream of real happiness the girl had ever known.

A servant brought a card. She took it from the tray and read it out mechanically: "Mr. George Gallon."

"Tell the gentleman----" she had begun; but before she could go further with her instructions George Gallon himself had entered the room.

"Well, Miss Carthew," he said, "I heard from an unexpected source that you were here, swaggering about as the widow of a French Comte. I needed a little holiday, and so I ran out to see whether you were a greater success as a Comtesse than you were as a typewriter in my office. Oh! I beg your pardon. You're not alone. I'm afraid I may have surprised your friend with some disagreeable news."

"Not at all," said Justin Wentworth calmly. "Miss Carthew has not only told me of that episode in her life, but how it became necessary for her to take up the position of a typewriter. Your treatment of her seemed almost incredible--until I saw you. No wonder it was necessary for Miss Carthew to adopt an *alias*, if this is the sort of persecution she is subject to under her own name. But in future it will be different. As Lady Wentworth she will be safe even from cads like you; and though she is not yet my wife, I'm thankful to say I have even now the right to protect her. When do you intend to leave Biarritz, Mr. Gallon?"

[image]

"When do you intend to leave Biarritz?"

George opened his lips furiously, but snapped them shut again. Then, having paused to reflect, he said: "I am here only for an hour. I'm going on to Spain."

"Pray watch over your tongue in that hour," returned Wentworth.

Then George Gallon was gone.

"I'll worship you all my life on my knees," said Joan. "I'm not worthy to touch your hand. But I will be. I will be a new self."

"Only the best of the old one, that is all I want," answered her lover. "The past is like a garment which you wore for protection against the storm. But there will be no more storms after this."

"Because you have forgiven me, because you believe in me," cried Joan, "you

will make of me the woman you would have me!"

"The woman you really are, or I would not have loved you," he said.
And so it was that Joan Carthew's career ended and her life began.

Butler & Tanner, The Selwood Printing Works, Frome, and London.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE GIRL WHO HAD NOTH-
ING ***

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